

WORLDLY ATONEMENT: NEO-AGRARIANISM AND  
MARRIAGE TO PLACE IN THE WORKS OF  
WENDELL BERRY

by

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## ABSTRACT

The writings of essayist, poet, novelist, and farmer Wendell Berry are a preeminent influence in an ongoing neo-agrarian renaissance. Drawing from his cannon of essays, fiction, and poetry, this work elucidates several key principles of Berry's "agrarian argument" including his sense of the relationship between culture, worship, and agriculture, his relationship to the past and the Western tradition, and the connections between urban and agricultural landscapes. This work argues that Berry's thought is not simply a nostalgic yearning for a never-realized agrarian ideal (as construed by some critics) but that Berry looks *forward* to the possibility of healthy communities (which for Berry include humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems) grounded in the health of the sustaining land, and that Berry's thought expands agrarian thought and practice beyond the family farm into rural and urban environments. This work examines Berry's critiques of industrial capitalism and current educational and religious thinking, and argues for Berry's twenty-first-century popular and academic relevance. From a broad focus on agrarian principles this work shifts to examine (primarily through the lens of his fiction) the proper relationship Berry imagines between humans and the surrounding world based on his metaphorical use of marriage and the moral exemplar of the husbandman to imagine a relationship of lifelong care and fidelity between individuals, community, and place. This work also examines Berry's sense of atonement, an integration of individuals to a sustaining pattern of community and an ultimately literal at-one-ment between humans, place, and the divinity Berry perceives as eminent in the world.

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## INTRODUCTION

The work of Wendell Berry—essayist, poet, novelist, farmer, and self-styled “Jeffersonian, Democrat and Agrarian” (Berry, Another Turn of the Crank 49)—is a foundational influence in what has become known as “neo-agrarianism” (Jackson 141). Berry’s agrarianism, “no small, whittled-down philosophy for rural folks, [but] a full-blown philosophy rooted in the realities of soil and nature as the ‘standard’ by which we also come to judge much more” (Orr, Uses of Prophecy 184). Neo-agrarianism works to break free of ossified definitions of agrarianism as nostalgia for an unrealized Jeffersonian dream of a nation of yeoman farmers, “simply a phase...in order to get on the track of technological progress” (Berry, Citizenship Papers 118), or merely a concern of farmers, ending “at the farm gate” (Orr 184). Through his writings Berry expands and enlivens the agrarian tradition, creating a union of concern and purpose between urbanites, religious thinkers, small farmers, and environmentalists.

Despite his voluminous canon of published works and his broad appeal amongst a promising coalition of conservationists, agrarians, scientists, and religious thinkers (often bridging heretofore deeply entrenched social lines) Berry is often critically categorized as simply a latter-day advocate of an unrealized Jeffersonian dream, a revivalist anachronistically yearning for a golden pre-industrial past, a “virtuous ruralism from which Americans have supposedly lapsed” (Buell, Environmental Imagination 44, 55). A common critical reaction to Berry therefore has been to “concede his literary talents [while] the substance of what he has to say” is simply dismissed as “nostalgia for a

bygone [. . .] time” (Orr 171). Yet while Berry acknowledges the influence of past figures such as Jefferson and the Southern Agrarians, and traces the lineage of his thought “through the writings of Virgil, Spencer, Shakespeare, [and] Pope” (Citizenship Papers 117), his neo-agrarianism goes beyond “a throwback to a never-realized pastoral arcadia [or] a caricatured, Luddite-inspired refusal to face the future...[to] a deliberate and intentional way of living and thinking that takes seriously the failures and successes of the past as they have been realized in our engagement with the earth and with each other” (Wirzba, Why Agrarianism Matters 4).

Berry’s neo-agrarianism “should not be viewed as a static philosophical system, but as an evolving collection of ideas and rhetorical strategies” (Smith 15) drawing its vital strength from a general set of core principles including care of the land upon which all life depends, a focus on the local, an emphasis on particulars rather than abstractions, a subsistence economy before a market economy, connections between urban and rural landscapes, good food, good work, and independence (Berry, Citizenship Papers 116-118). While historically agrarianism has been associated almost exclusively with farmers, contemporary agrarians believe that agrarian principles may be adopted (and locally adapted) not only by farmers, but by anyone who participates in agriculture—or in other words everyone who eats—since Berry famously pointed out that “eating is an agricultural act” (What are People for? 145).

The first chapter of this work examines Berry’s influence in an ongoing neo-agrarian renaissance by elucidating Berry’s primary agrarian principles drawn from his definition of culture. This chapter seeks to address criticism that would dismiss Berry’s ideas as anachronistic and irrelevant within a contemporary context. This chapter argues



that Berry does not simply yearn for a golden past but that his works describe a troubled a past that is simultaneously the source of vexations and hope. While Berry's vision of interdependent communities conscious of their inherent ties to one another and attuned to the well being of their place has never been realized historically, it is a vision Berry believes is still attainable. This chapter also addresses issues of the sentimentalization of farming in Berry's work and his relationship to the larger pastoral tradition.

The second chapter addresses contemporary issues facing neo-agrarianism by examining Berry's challenges to global corporate industrialism and the prospect of alternative economies built upon agrarian principles. This chapter argues that while many of the themes Berry invokes in his work such as marriage, religion, and community may appear overly traditional, they in fact present profound critiques of foundational institutions such as industrial capitalism, contemporary education, and mainstream Christianity. This chapter examines cultural challenges faced by agrarian reformers, highlights contemporary popularizations of Berry's ideas, and concludes with Berry's expression of hope in the realization of agrarian ideals.

The third chapter shifts from a general treatment of Berry's agrarian principles to a more specific examination of what he considers proper human relations to the natural world. Drawing from his essays to explore the "marriage" relationship Berry describes between farmer and land placed within the larger pattern of community, this section examines how that relationship is portrayed in his fiction. This chapter examines Berry's challenge to the heroic tradition present in Western thought and scripture and reviews the role of the farmer husbandman as societal exemplar in Berry's work. Finally, this chapter explores Berry's sense of an intimate atonement between humans, the sustaining land,

and the divine presence he perceives as eminent within it—and in which Berry calls for reconciliation of the Christian mind to the sustaining world.

The overarching aim of this work is to draw attention to a thinker who has been a founding influence in a small yet rapidly expanding system of thought that moves beyond the historically limited perspective of environmentalist concerns over wilderness preservation to a comprehensive view of human engagement with the surrounding world. Berry's neo-agrarian argument recognizes that "people cannot live apart from nature...and yet, people cannot live in nature without changing it" (Home Economics 7). Recognizing that "humans must make a choice as to the kind and scale of the difference they make" (7), Berry poses evocative questions such as: What are people for? How should we change the world on which we depend? What are proper ways to work within the pattern of specific places? What must I do? Attempting to answer such questions, Berry works to break down socially constructed binaries such as domestication versus wildness, urban versus rural, and culture versus nature, believing that these poles are not in reality opposed but interwoven and interdependent and that "authentic experience of either will reveal the need of one for the other" (12). Berry's thought unapologetically cuts across contemporary political and cultural factions to formulate a way of thinking that confirms human importance yet that humbly acknowledges human ignorance, frailty, and limitation. Perceiving a world infused with the divine, Berry strives to comprehend the proper human place "both on the earth and in the order of things" stating that "where the creation is whole nothing is extraneous. The presence of the creation makes this a holy place, and it is as a pilgrim that I have come—to give homage of awe and love, to submit to mystification" (Long-Legged House 199, 201).

## A QUIET VOICE THAT MAKES THE MOUNTAINS TREMBLE:

### WENDELL BERRY'S AGRARIAN ARGUMENT

#### The Agrarian Argument: Berry on Culture and Agriculture

Neo-agrarianism may be characterized as a grassroots social or economic movement, Wendell Berry candidly declares his “distrust of movements,” however, stating that “even movements that have seemed necessary and dear to [me]” tend to “lapse into self-righteousness and self-betrayal...often [becoming] too specialized” (Citizenship Papers 44-45). Worst of all, Berry alleges, is a movement’s tendency to “loose its language either to its own confusion about meaning and practice, or to preemption by its enemies,” citing the decay in meaning of words such as “natural,” “sustainable,” and “organic” as examples of such loss (45). Berry even resists the idea of naming “the movement I think I am a part of,” wryly suggesting that perhaps it could be referred to as “The Nameless Movement for Better Ways of Doing—which I hope is too long and uncute to be used as a bumper sticker,” although he fears that even that name would ultimately become “the NMBWD and acquire a headquarters and a budget and an inventory of T-shirts” (46).

Although Berry acknowledges having spent a significant portion of his lifetime, “twenty-five or thirty years...making and remaking different versions of the same argument...inherited from a long line of familial, neighborly, literary, and scientific ancestors,” or what Berry refers to as “the agrarian argument,” he resists authoritative lists of agrarian values or principles, stating that “the agrarian argument can be summed

up in as many ways as it can be made” (43). A handful of systematic “road maps” of Berry’s ideas have nevertheless been attempted. Political science scholar Kimberly Smith (who uses the framework of virtue ethics to frame Berry’s core ideas) lists Berry’s principle “virtues” as: autonomy, fidelity, humility, propriety, and sophrosyne—a Greek term describing a state of self-control and moderation “that prevents hubristic overreaching” (136). For historian Brian Donahue, Berry’s “agrarian values” are care of the land, beauty, good food, good work, and community (36-37).

While systematic lists of Berry’s agrarian principles/virtues/values are invariably incomplete, all such lists agree that Berry’s ideas are grounded in “the good health of the land” (*Unsettling of America* 188). A general understanding of Berry’s agrarian principles may be ascertained by examining Berry’s sense of the intimate relationship between land and culture. Like all agrarians, Berry recognizes the health and fertility of land as the vital foundation of healthy communities. Yet drawing on ecological ideas implicit in Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, Berry extends the concept of community beyond humans to include the natural world: “If we speak of a healthy community, we cannot be speaking of a community that is merely human. We are talking about a neighborhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself: its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of the nonhuman creatures that belong to it” (*Sex* 14). Using the standard of the health of the community (in its largest sense), Berry recognizes that healthy land is the commonwealth (and vital to the common health) of all living things.

Berry considers healthy land not only as the obvious basis of bodily health but also essential to healthy human culture. Etymologically tracing the word “culture” to its roots in “cultivation” and “cult,” linking the idea of culture to tillage and worship, Berry

points out that “these words all come from an Indo-European root meaning both ‘to revolve’ and ‘to dwell.’ To live, to survive on the earth, and to care for the soil, and to worship, are all bound at the root to the idea of a cycle” (Unsettling of America 87).

Interweaving cultivation, worship, and dwelling within the context of cycles in place, Berry defines culture as not simply “a collection of relics or ornaments” but,

a practical necessity...a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, and aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well. (43)

Healthy culture, a culture that does not endanger its own source of well being originates, according to Berry, from living within the context of and mindfully interacting with natural cycles. A viable culture is one “that know[s] what works and what doesn’t work in a given place” (Grubbs 50), and strives to preserve the fertility and health of natural cycles.

An exegesis of Berry’s rich definition of culture provides insight into many of Berry’s key agrarian themes. Berry’s sense of culture is *communal*, it is “shared by all members of a community” (Oxford American 343), which as mentioned previously, includes humans and nonhumans, and implies a common recognition of healthy land as vital to maintain its existence and well being—binding together common health on the commonwealth of the land (Another Turn of the Crank 51). For Berry, culture involves a combination of order and wildness. Berry believes that good agriculture applies a certain necessary degree of order to natural systems yet “respects the natural character of the place” (Gift of Good Land 210) and maintains the “ultimately unknowable” “dark wilderness” of the soil (Home Economics 140). Similarly, culture must achieve a

marriage (or union) of wildness and order: “nature and human culture, wildness and domesticity, are not opposed but are interdependent. Authentic experience of either will reveal the need of one for the other.” (12). While *some* order is required, Berry warns that any human “attempt at total control is an invitation to disorder” and that “patterns of cooperation are safer than the mechanisms of exclusion, even though they lack the illusory safety of control” (Unsettling of America 71).

Berry’s culture is also an “order” in the sense that it is a membership (the principle characters in Berry’s fiction are referred to as the Port William membership). This membership of community in place, conscious of implicit ties to one another and to the land, is one into which an individual may be born (or adopted), but that ultimately one must choose and that does not necessarily follow biological family lines (Smith 110-113). Examples of the nature and dynamics of this sense of order as membership abound in Berry’s fiction. Members such as Jack Beechum’s daughter Clara—who leaves Port William to attend college where she marries a banker and returns only to make a profit by selling her father’s farm after his death—are born into the ties of the Port William membership yet choose to leave. These individuals become estranged from and forfeit their place within the membership (Memory of Old Jack 133-140). Others, like Elton and Mary Penn, who begin as outsiders working on Jack’s farm as tenants are adopted into the pattern of the Port William community, and with the help of fellow member Wheeler Catlett are able to purchase Jack’s farm from his daughter thereby confirming their place in the succession of membership in place (That Distant Land 266-288). All become “members”—each representing “a constituent piece of a complex structure” (Oxford American 1058) that remain in the membership not by coercion or by a lack of options

but by conscious choice. Mirroring Berry's own decision to return to Kentucky after leaving a promising teaching career at Stanford and later New York City, various characters in Berry's fiction (e.g., Wheeler Catlett, Andy Catlett, and Mat Feltner), leave Port William yet decide to return and take their places "in the old pattern" (Remembering 164) of community in place (more on the theme of returning to the context of the pattern of community later).

For Berry, *memory* plays a crucial role in farming and culture. Memory is essential to good farming in that families that have "farmed land through two or three generations will possess not just the land but a remembered history of its own mistakes and of the remedies of those mistakes" (Home Economics 164) so that "the land would not have to pay for the cost of trial-and-error education for every new owner" (Standing by Words 78). Highly specific knowledge—both successes and failures—of the complex interactions between humans, animals, plants, land, and climate in particular places must be passed along by those who have spent time interacting with those places rather than absentee owners or by the centralized knowledge of "experts" who often possess only general or theoretical knowledge and who often serve interests other than the well-being of the land and community. Likewise, human culture must be attuned to its memory; the exhilaration of holding "creeds and schools in abeyance" tempered by the acknowledgement that they must "never [be] forgotten" (Whitman 25). For Berry, vessels of cultural memory such as literature, scripture, and art serve as repositories of lived human experience and interaction with the world. Wise students of the human cultural legacy therefore must be willing "to learn *from* them" rather than simply "*about*

them” (Home Economics 79) lest their mistakes be relived—often at the expense of the sustaining land (more on Berry’s relationship with the past below).

In Berry’s fictional Port William, the memories of the community are inextricably tied to the land itself. Reminiscent of Australian Aborigines for whom “dreamtime stories and the encompassing terrain are reciprocally mnemonic, experientially coupled in a process of mutual invocation” and for whom “the land and the language...are inseparable” (Abrams 177), Berry’s depiction of the intimate ties between land and memory in his fiction—such as his account of Art Rowanberry’s “compound mind” in which “something that happened would remind him of something that he remembered, which would remind him of something that his grandfather remembered”—is inextricably woven into the land itself: “He lived in the place, *but the place was where the memories were*, and he walked among them, tracing them out over the living ground” (That Distant Land 368, emphasis added). For the Port William membership, the land serves as a complex and interactive repository of memories and cultural instruction not simply contained within the consciousness of individuals, but continually evoked as members interact with the land. And although comparing aborigines who have been dwelling in and adapting to particular places for thousands of years (yet who also appear to have initially struggled to adapt to their place, Flannery) to a community of Anglo farmers whose residence in place reaches back a mere handful of generations may seem tenuous, one of Berry’s primary themes throughout his work is the challenging project of becoming native and ultimately belonging to place (Long-Legged House 166). Recognizing the difficulties of becoming native to place, Berry laments that “we [descendents of European settlers] still have not, in any meaningful way, arrived in



America...[upon arrival] We did not know where we were, and to avoid the humility and the labor of our ignorance, we pretended to be where we had come from” (183,206).

For Berry, the path to becoming native or belonging to place lies in *insight*, “deep intuitive understanding” (Oxford American 872), gleaned from time spent in close interaction with the land and from experiences gained living in place. Berry believes that this insight born of experience must include reverence: “we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe...for I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain on it” (Long-Legged House 196). Berry believes that a shift from a desire for complete understanding of the world (a term Berry prefers to “the environment” or “nature”) to a *reverential* posture that recognizes the inherently limited human capacity to comprehend the world’s infinite complexity. Berry’s call for a change from “absolute owner, manager, and engineer” to “steward” (Life is a Miracle 8), or one that “care[s] for something that does not belong to you” (Grubbs 95), involves an acknowledgment of the reality that humans cannot come to an omniscient understanding of the natural world, and that acting “on the assumption that sure knowledge is complete knowledge” (Life is a Miracle 11) is invariably treacherous.

In speaking of reverence, it must be noted that while Berry’s references to God and his liberal use of terms such “creation,” “reverence,” land as “gift,” and his assertion that “the agrarian mind is, at bottom, a religious mind” (Citizenship Papers 118) may for some readers indicate a narrowly defined sense of religiosity. Berry’s sense of “religious” is not necessarily circumscribed by a particular denomination or creed

however and he is in fact often critical of “organized” religion (What are People for? 95-102). Berry employs the term “religious” in what he terms a more “primitive” sense as “the sense of the presence of mystery or divinity in the world, or even to the attitudes of wonder of awe or humility before the works of creation” (Continuous Harmony 3).

Berry’s sense of reverence need not be confined to formal religiosity. A sense of mystery or divinity inspired by the infinite renewal of life and the complexity of the world may evoke feelings of awe and humility that Berry would consider “religious” yet are accessible to all and are not the exclusive privilege of any denominational persuasion.

Given Berry’s vision of humans as members of a community of life in an infinitely complex world, Berry is concerned with questions of propriety—human attitudes and actions that are “appropriate or fitting” (Oxford American 1360) within the context of community. For Berry, propriety and “good work” must be considered jointly since human aspirations and work must be governed by a sense of propriety—“the fittingness of our conduct to our place and circumstances” (Life is a Miracle 13). Berry admits that while propriety is “an old term, even an old fashioned one...its value is in its reference to the fact that we are not alone” and that “we cannot speak or act or live out of context” (13). The “antithesis of individualism” (14), propriety seeks to determine what is appropriate in a given place based on human capabilities and limitations, and the inherent characteristics and limits of particular places.

Berry’s essays provide various agricultural case studies which he believes demonstrate human work that is properly adapted to the characteristics of place. Berry praises the Amish use of horses in their work “because they are living creatures, and therefore fit harmoniously into a pattern of relationships that are necessarily biological,

and that rhyme analogically from ecosystem to crop, from field to farmer...ecosystem, farm, field, crop, horse, farmer, family, and community are in certain critical ways like each other” (Standing by Words 75). While visiting the mountains of Peru, Berry admires local farmers’ “great care and frugality in the use of land; every available scrap of land, no matter how small is painstakingly used and conserved” (Gift of Good Land 13). Berry also examines the Papago of the desert southwest who “in response to their meager land...developed a culture that was one of the grand human achievements. It was intricately respectful of the means of life, surpassingly careful of all the possibilities of survival,” noting that “the result was paradoxical: in these almost impossible circumstances, the Papago achieved...a society of abundance” (51). For Berry, propriety is necessary for good work, work that is informed and conditioned by what is *proper* rather than what is *possible* within the context of particular places.

Berry declares that “to live, we must go to work...we must work in a place,” and that although the industrial economy strives to separate “workers from the effects of their work...their work will have a precise and practical influence first on the place where it is being done, and then on every place where its products are used, on every place where its attitude toward its products is felt, on every place to which its by-products are carried” (Citizenship Papers 33). The realization of Berry’s agrarian vision is in what he terms “good work,” work informed by the recognition of vital ties to healthy land, done within the context of place and community, and informed by memory, reverence, and propriety. While our ties to the land through agriculture are vital, Berry’s sense of work may be applied not only to farming but to all work done well, work “that is, careful, considerate, and loving...of the whole process, natural and cultural” (Home Economics 144). All

work is done in *some* place, and for Berry “real work” must be conscious of its effects on its place as well as its effect on other places. Berry understands Gary Snyder’s “real work” as “local jobs of right livelihood, right neighborhood, and caretaking” (Standing by Words 158); a comprehensive work that respects the source of life and the interdependence of communities and that must be practiced by all, both urban and rural populations. Berry warns that bad work that disregards its effects on places or sees nature’s bounty as simply abstract “raw material,” “is both an insult to its user and a danger to its source” (Home Economics 144), and that while “good work is our salvation and our joy; that shoddy or dishonest or self-serving work is our curse and our doom” (Unsettling of America 12).

The basic principles of Berry’s “agrarian argument” may be therefore ascertained by examining his definition of a healthy human culture. For Berry, culture that is grounded in the ties of land and community, that involves a communal order preserving its wisdom and memories, and that is governed by a reverential sense propriety in place is the only culture that will in turn practice good work and that has any hope to endure and preserve itself and its place in the world.

### Berry and the Academy

A recent flurry of academic attention—including *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, (which is dedicated to Berry and that describes him as “an inspiration and indispensable guide...and a stimulant for cultural reform” (Wirzba, Why Agrarianism Matters 20)), Kimberly Smith’s Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace, Wendell Berry Life and Work, and Conversations with Wendell Berry, seems to indicate recent interest in Berry’s ideas and works. Kimberly Smith notes however a general

neglect of Berry's thought by the academy: "it [seems] surprising...that Berry's ideas, which have been circulating for over thirty years, haven't already generated more critical commentary" (Smith 3). Smith affirms that "such inattention is to be expected, given the status of agrarian ideology in the scholarly community generally" in which a definition of agrarianism as "reactionary nostalgia for a preindustrial, noncommercial past remains academic orthodoxy" (3). While neo-agrarian proponents "insist that agrarianism is a complex and dynamic tradition that has generated a wealth of progressive ideas... [and] that it expresses values many Americans embrace," Smith notes that "scholars tend to assume that agrarian ideology has little intellectual content of practical significance; indeed, they have been proclaiming its demise for fifty years" (3-4).

Despite his "numerous and ever-growing" (Grubbs 135) readership, many within the academy (with notable exceptions cited in this work) dismiss Berry's work, characterizing him as a "quaint reactionary" (White 181), a proponent of a nostalgic yearning to a bucolic past that never existed, or incorrectly understand his agrarian argument as a call to flee the hectic city to the simplicity of the country as archaic and provincial farmers. These critics tend to simply relegate Berry and his ideas to the realm of noble yet ultimately impractical "dead ends" (180). These dismissals however often stem from a superficial understanding of Berry's ideas, and a careful reading of Berry's works reveals a vision that is much more complex than simply a desire to "turn back the clock," a sentimentalization of a "simple" rural lifestyle, or a limited provincial worldview.

The Prophetic American Voice: Berry and the Past

Berry's relationship with the past in his essays, poetry, and fiction is certainly more complex than Lawrence Buell's characterization of Berry's work (which is representative of many within the academy) as simply evoking a "virtuous ruralism from which Americans have supposedly lapsed" (Buell, Environmental Imagination 55). Berry in fact does honor the past, including the rural past, as the source of language, culture, and of "knowledge of what works and what hasn't worked," "the source of nearly all our good" (Standing by Words 102), and as "a manual to the world" (Grubs 89). However, Berry is also highly critical of the past, of past attitudes toward nature and past treatment of communities and land, and does not believe that the past contains models entirely sufficient to serve current needs. In his account of his own Kentucky farm as well in the fictional world of Port William, the "wraiths of the past" (Unforeseen Wilderness 50), i.e., the mistakes of earlier inhabitants or "first arrivers," haunt later generations in the form of diminished landscapes and topsoil loss—their destructive attitudes and practices literally carved into the land.

In Berry's novel *A Place on Earth*, Mat Feltner laments the destruction of the land through various generations (including his own): "I expect I've seen half of the topsoil go off of some farms around here in my time....We've been slow to have enough sense to farm this kind of land, and lack plenty yet. My daddy hurt some of these hillsides badly in his time. Made some bad mistakes. I tried to learn from his, and went right on and made some bad ones of my own" (Place on Earth 180). In Berry's story "It Wasn't Me," Wheeler Catlett describes the past waste of land and the assumed "right to ruin," or the right to govern one's property as one wishes regardless of the consequences. This

perceived “right to ruin,” inherent in Berry’s sense of “rugged individualism,” is central to the historical use of land in America: “People have been exercising those rights here for a hundred and seventy-five years or so...and in general they’ve wasted more than they’ve saved” (That Distant Land 283).

Contrary to his portrayal by some critics as simply wishing to return to a virtuous rural past, Berry declares that “there is no time in history, since white occupation began in America that any sane and thoughtful person would want to go back to, because that history has so far been unsatisfactory” (Grubbs 102). Instead, Berry looks to his hope “that it might be possible to produce stable, locally adapted communities in America, even though we haven’t done it” (102). For Berry, the past is to be “judged and corrected” (Standing by Words 102) rather than simply being copied or categorically rejected as archaic and irrelevant—an attitude he considers immature and one that plays into the hands of “the industrial economy” which capitalizes on a “hatred of the past” and a chronic need for “innovation” via planned obsolescence and by selling techno-fixes to problems that the economy itself has created (Citizenship Papers 18). According to Berry, even many of those who study and claim to pass along the past’s valuable cultural inheritances in that “teachers and students read the great songs and stories to learn *about* them, not to learn *from* them” (Home Economics 79). Between the extremes of outright rejection of the past and futile attempts to recreate it, Berry maintains that the past must be judged and evaluated critically with an eye to the valuable and often useful experience (successes and mistakes) of those who inhabited the world before.

Along with a general “hated of the past,” Berry condemns the categorical rejection of Western thinking and culture that he perceives as fashionable amongst the

intellectual elite. Berry confirms that “there is no reason why one culture can’t learn from another.” He acknowledges a significant personal debt to Buddhism (Sex 95) and recommends that “our schools should begin to teach the histories, cultures, arts, and languages of the Islamic nations” (Citizenship Papers 21). Berry also acknowledges the influence of African culture in America and in his own thinking stating that “in the effort to live meaningfully and decently in America, a white man simply cannot learn all that he needs to know from other American white men” (Hidden Wound 78). He also laments the failure of early white settlers to learn from the Native Americans: “that we failed to learn from [Native Americans] how to live in this land is a stupidity—a racial stupidity—that will corrode the heart of our society until the day comes, if it ever does, when we do turn back to learn from them” (107).

Although not averse to learning from and respecting other cultures, Berry states that “real pluralism extends respect—not tolerance—toward all *rooted, locally adapted* cultures that know what works and what doesn’t work in a given place” (Grubbs 50, emphasis added). Berry believes that “That kind of pluralism doesn’t exist now. In fact as soon as a culture becomes rooted, our so called pluralism *withdraws* its respect, labeling it provincialism or anachronism.” (50). Berry considers current “antipathy toward Western culture...ill-founded and destructive” (Standing by Words 141), and echoes agrarian biologist/geneticist Wes Jackson, who believes that far from being worthless, “Western Civilization...is rich and filled with hope” (Jackson 73). Berry therefore combs the literary and spiritual legacies of the West, attempting to glean wisdom from alternative traditions of community, care, and responsibility. Berry believes that these traditions have ancient roots in Western culture and have co-existed yet have often been



eclipsed by an increasingly pervasive techno-centric culture of disintegration that alienates individuals and communities from the surrounding world.

Following his logic of gleaning wisdom from the past while rejecting destructive ideas or tendencies, Berry and other neo-agrarians acknowledge a considerable debt to the intellectual legacy of agrarianism yet they do not feel bound to its past incarnations or attitudes. Law professor and neo-agrarian advocate Eric Freyfogle aptly employs the metaphor of pruning to describe neo-agrarianism's relationship with the past:

New Agrarianism...has pruned key elements from older agrarian ways while nourishing other shoots and stimulating new ones. Gone entirely is the old slave-based plantation strand of agrarianism; a regional variant to begin with, it deviated markedly from the family-based homestead ideal. Still around but much cut back are the once powerful assumptions about gender roles within the family and the larger household community....On the flourishing side, there is the heightened interest today in land conservation, which has taken on a distinctly ecological cast. Much strengthened, too, has been the New Agrarian challenge to materialism and to the dominance of the market in so many aspects of life. And yet even with its new shapes and manifestations, agrarianism today remains as centered as ever on its core concerns: the land, natural fertility, healthy families, and the maintenance of durable links between people and place.  
(xvii)

Unlike the past (and often caricatured) conceptions of agrarians as wealthy landed southern slaveholders, rugged individualists, or conservative academics seeking to preserve a lost romanticized culture, contemporary agrarians insist that neo-agrarianism is an evolving system of thought, attitudes, and actions that seeks to cast off counter-productive attitudes of the past in order to fashion a way of thinking that is more widely applicable to current cultural and environmental challenges. Neo-agrarians strive to forward modes of thinking and living that are adaptable to both rural *and* urban settings: “with appropriate modifications, agrarian ways are suitable for a far larger number of

families. Even those with full-time office jobs can add significant agrarian elements to their lives and locales.” (xxxvii).

While Berry is often dismissed by casual critics as an articulate yet nostalgic idealist bent on reviving a nonexistent golden era, others, such as David Orr, describe him in prophetic terms: “Page Smith had it right, I believe, when he described Wendell Berry as ‘*the* prophetic American voice of our day.’ This perspective may help to explain why he is both widely admired and ignored.” (Uses of Prophecy 176). Rather than archaic and nostalgic, Orr refers to Berry as a prophet and a futurist, noting that “prophets do not just condemn, they intend to move us toward better possibilities....Prophets are poised between the past and a better future.” While other literary critics also grant Berry a prophetic mantle, sardonically characterizing Berry as preaching “an agrarian jeremiad” nostalgically hopeful that “the old Jeffersonian dream...might still be achieved at this eleventh hour” (Buell, Environmental Imagination 55; Environmental Criticism 78), according to Orr, “To dismiss Berry as simply nostalgic...misses the point. He ought to be read as much as a futurist describing better possibilities as someone looking back to what once had been” (176).

Yet even if Berry is, as if often charged, intent on “turning back to the past,” C.S. Lewis notes that, “We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.” (Lewis 23). If approached from Lewis’ definition of progressivism as looking to the wisdom of the past while charting an appropriate course

for the future, Wendell Berry—rather than a throwback to an archaic past—is in fact among the most progressive men among us.

Town and Country: Interdependent Communities and the  
Sentimentalization of Farming

Some critics of Berry's work balk at what they perceive as his attempt to idealize a virtuous rural life, to revive farming as an honored occupation, and to promote a mass 'return to the country' as a solution to environmental and social ills. These commentators dismiss him as simply another addition to a long line of pastoral writers who idealize rustic life and who cling to a "nostalgia for the vanishing 'country way of life' extending back to Anglo-Saxon times" (Buell, Environmental Imagination 161). It must be recognized however that for Berry the idea of urban versus rural is an artificial dichotomy and that while farming and rural life are undoubtedly significant in Berry's neo-agrarian thought, his fundamental theme is not farming per se, but community. Rather than considering urban and rural environments as separate and autonomous, Berry's sense of interwoven and interdependent communities—with members living in proximity, mindful of inherent ties, and sharing a commonwealth of healthy land—is the glue that effectively binds Berry's agrarian concepts and that makes them applicable beyond the farm. For Berry, *community* is the undergirding framework, the larger pattern in which everything else (including farmers *and* urban dwellers) fits—which, as previously mentioned, Berry expands to include "human neighbors...but also...water, earth, and air, the plants and animals, all the creatures with whom our local life is shared" (Hidden Wound 129).

Beyond the family, "because families die out, and...even an extended family isn't large enough to do all the necessary jobs of work," Berry considers community the

“vessel” for the transmission of knowledge of how to properly inhabit particular places, “the organism...that does the remembering, that does the teaching,”—“the heartbeat of continuity” (Grubbs 109, 115). In Berry’s thought, individual and even familial autonomy outside of the context of the interdependences and responsibilities of communal relationships is illusory (Unsettling of America 111). In his writings, particularly his fiction, the difference between those within community membership and without it is not those who are part of a community and those who are not, but between those who become conscious of, accept their place within, and are faithful to the “network of mutual dependence and influence” (110) that constitutes community, and those who fail to recognize, neglect, or attempt to ignore communal ties. Community ties are implicit, but in order for a community to be healthy they must be recognized.

Living in a “Bible-based culture” (Grubbs 128), the members of Berry’s fictional Port William possess an innate knowledge of various Biblical ideas, and in his story “The Wild Birds,” Berry’s fictional Burley Coulter echoes the apostle Paul’s affirmation that “we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25), stating that “we are members of each other. All of us. The difference ain’t in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don’t” (That Distant Land 356). The work of Berry’s fiction is not simply to portray the inherent connections between people and land, but to imagine a community in which the human members are *conscious* of their membership within the pattern of community in place, acknowledge their place within the context of that membership, and remain faithful to it despite difficulty—a fidelity based on their “practice of love...from which all else springs” (Grubbs 55). This fidelity to community is a difficult proposition however given the modern Western shift toward liberated

individualism which has resulted in a glorification of the self, but often a radical decline of community ties and obligations (Davis 140).

Within the context of interconnected communities, conceptual delineations between urban and rural places and between pristine ‘natural’ and human-influenced environments begin to erode as intrinsic interdependencies are recognized. In contrast to what Buell characterizes as “first wave” environmental thought which tends to draw sharp distinctions between the positive natural world (i.e., wilderness) and negative human-constructed or influenced environments (i.e., cities, suburbs, and farmland) and that generally characterizes urban environments as “non-places” (Buell Environmental Criticism 88), Berry (although certainly not uncritical of cities) seeks to redeem urbanized environments. Berry acknowledges the possibility of place and community in urban areas: “City people have places—have the earth underfoot—just like country people. In city and country, the most necessary job of work now is to recover the possibility of neighborliness between ourselves and the other people and other creatures who live where we do—both on the earth and in the local neighborhood” (Grubbs 22). Berry affirms that “there are lots of good reasons to want to live in the city” considering them a vital repository of culture and stating that living in a “membership” of neighborliness and care, such as is portrayed in his fiction, is possible “in a city or a suburb or wherever you are” (206).

While Berry seeks to redeem urban environments to rural audiences, he also works to redeem rural environments to urbanites, striving to make both sides of the alleged urban/rural divide mindful and respectful of the interdependencies that inherently bind them. Like environmentalism, which has historically been primarily an urban

phenomenon and that strives to protect places that are not necessarily geographically proximate, neo-agrarian advocates describe an “urban agrarian culture” whose scope not only includes often distant farmland but “the care of all living spaces—residential neighborhoods, schools, and playgrounds, parks, and landfills, as well as glaciers, forests, wetlands, and oceans—the protection of all the places that maintain life” (Wirzba, Why Agrarianism Matters 6). Like environmentalists who argue that all people have interest in the preservation of wilderness and the environment in general, Berry insists that *all* people are intimately involved in agriculture and in maintaining the well being of rural areas since all people must eat to survive in that “eating is an agricultural act” (What are People for? 145).

Berry notes that “how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used” (149). Those living in cities therefore have vital connections and responsibilities to the surrounding country and vice versa (Grubbs 22). Berry laments however that currently, given that “the origins of the products are typically too distant and too scattered and the process of trade, manufacturing, transportation, and marketing too complicated...we cannot live lives that are economically and ecologically responsible” (Citizenship Papers 114). As an antidote to the current food system which Berry condemns as damaging to the environment and communities, expensive, and which leaves urban populations vulnerable to disruption, Berry recommends shortening supply lines so that a city is fed as much as possible by its own countryside—“buying, so far as possible, fresh food that is locally grown and preparing it at home. And it means, when possible, raising a garden” (Home Economics 6; Grubbs 22). Berry believes that even growing vegetables in small plots or apartment window boxes enables urbanites to better

understand and appreciate how food is produced and to recognize their ties to agriculture and to the well being of rural places.

In Berry's thought, urbanites, conscious of their connections to agriculture and to the surrounding country will tend to view "good farming"—which Berry defines as "proper use and care of an immeasurable gift" (Citizenship Papers 144)—as essential and honorable work,

an art...[that] grows not only out of factual knowledge but out of cultural tradition...learned not only by precept but by example, by apprenticeship...[requiring] not merely a competent knowledge of facts and processes, but also a complex set of attitudes, a certain culturally evolved stance, in the face of the unknown. (Continuous Harmony 94)

Classicist Victor Davis Hanson states that "a nation...can be judged by the way it treats those who produce its food" (Hanson 8). With farming recognized as a complex and necessary art, Berry believes the role of farming and of the good farmer in society would shift from being considered "a factory worker" or "a 'hick,' 'without the dignity, knowledge, or social respectability of a business man or a member of a profession'" (Gift of Good Land x) to being recognized and honored as "the trustee of the life of the topsoil, the keeper of the rural community" (Continuous Harmony 128).

Of course, as critics correctly recognize, farming and a rural lifestyle is easily idealized. Berry notes that two traditions seem to accompany the idea of farming: "We've got a tradition for the sentimentalization of farmers and we've got another tradition—these always go together when you're dealing with oppressed people—for the denigration of farmers. They exist side by side and they're very dangerous to somebody who has farming as a subject" (47). The tendency to "celebrate the *innocent* life of shepherds and shepherdesses in poems, places, and prose romances" (Oxford Literary 186, emphasis

added) is evident throughout the pastoral tradition. Addressing the pastoral as a genre, literary critic Dana Philips correctly notes that “one of the limitations of the pastoral...is the pastoral’s tendency to assume that the countryside and the territory are much *simpler* places than the city or metropolis, when in fact they aren’t” (Phillips 18). Philips cites Leo Marx’s discussion of the “pastoral impulse” as “a desire, in the face of the growing power and complexity of organized society, to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek out the basis for a simpler, more satisfying mode of life in a realm ‘closer,’ as we say to nature,” and notes that “if anything, the city is the simpler place environmentally or, rather, ecologically, in light of the fact (the historical fact) of its having been made over into a greener and more pleasant space, and therefore a more ‘pastoral’ one” (18).

Berry’s choice to return to his native place seems to fit the traditional pastoral mold and may be characterized simply an enactment of the “pastoral impulse” to “disengage from the dominant culture” and seek out a “simpler more satisfying life closer to nature.” Berry denies this assumption however and in fact claims the opposite:

When I am called, as to my astonishment I sometimes am, a devotee of “simplicity” (since I live supposedly as a “simple farmer”), I am obliged to reply that I gave up the simple life when I left New York City in 1964 and came here. In New York, I lived as a passive consumer, supplying nearly all my needs by purchase, whereas here I supply many of my needs from this place by my work (and pleasure) and am responsible besides for the care of the place. (Way of Ignorance 48)

Rather than a simplification, Berry refers to his returning to his home ground as a “complexification” in that despite the exhilaration of beginning to “see the place with a new clarity and a new understanding” he also began to see his place in “a new seriousness” (Long-Legged House 177). Berry explains: “When I lived in other places I looked on their evils with the curious eye of a traveler; I was not responsible for them; it



cost me nothing to be a critic, for I had not been there long, and I did not feel that I would stay. But here, now that I am both native and citizen, there is no immunity to what is wrong” (178). Rather than escaping urban problems, Berry’s writing reveals an effective *reversal* of the “pastoral tendency” of moving from complex city to the simple country in that Berry believes his moving into the country simply put him in contact with new and often more complex problems: “there isn’t any peaceful place....People often assume that there’s some place where you can get away from the problems. But there isn’t any such place....People who move to the country to get out of the war really are moving to the front lines. That’s where much of the damage is being done” (Grubbs 112). This sentiment is echoed by Freyfogle:

In the stock pastoral tale, the fictional hero escapes from a corrupted city and flees to a pristine wholesome world, there to begin life in a new Eden. Agrarian writers of recent decades have had a far different story to recount. Not Eden but a battle-weary land commonly greets the agrarian pilgrim today, a land marred by eroded hills, polluted rivers, and biologically impoverished forests (xxiii).

Hardly a Virgilian pastoral escapist, Berry believes his move to the country placed him in a position to better observe and participate in complex cultural and environmental challenges from which, by virtue of the obfuscating influence of global retailers and supermarkets and by the privileged position of cities in a system of rural colonialism, urban dwellers have become largely insulated.

Berry acknowledges that the work of his own farm living has also benefited him in that it has served as a “necessary discipline and corrective” to the tendency to sentimentalize farming (Grubbs 47). Rather than romanticizing farm life and work, Berry speaks of the love and often difficult discipline necessary to complete such demanding work: “Once you get into a relationship with even so much as a vegetable garden, you

realize that you have to do the work whether you want to or not. You may have got into it because of love, but there are going to be days when you are sick and you're going to have to do your work anyhow" (42). For Berry, a "love that enforces care" and commitment to place, like love between individuals, must go beyond mere romantic feelings or the thrill of initial infatuation into sustained commitment and action, "something you practice whether you feel like it or not" (42). Recalling the words of a neighboring farmer: "They'll never do worth a damn as long as they've got two choices," Berry considers "eliminating the second choice, [forsaking] all others" as essential to maintain marriage relations between individuals and in turn between humans and land. Heeding his neighbor's advice "we [Berry and his wife Tanya] decided that this place would have to be our fate and that we'd stay here no matter what happened as long as life was possible...since then, life on this place has had a much different and fuller meaning for us" (13).

For Berry, the "good" farmer willingly enters into this markedly unromantic and demanding yet, according to Berry, ultimately meaningful relationship with the world: "[those] who have undertaken to cherish the world and do it no damage, not because they are duty-bound, but because they love the world and love their children" partake in a type of work that "serves the earth they live on and from and with...[and that is] pleasurable and meaningful and unending" (Unforeseen Wilderness 33-34). Yet given the cultural and economic challenges such a life currently (and historically) confronts: "comparatively few white people have ever lived this way in America. And for the ones who have done so, or who have attempted to do so, it has been difficult" (34). While affirming that he believes "an ecologically and culturally responsible agriculture is

possible,” Berry acknowledges major obstacles to good farming including the current “low public standing” of farmers and that new small farmers struggle in a “farmer-killing and land-killing economy” (Gift of Good Land ix, x). Berry declares: “I want to say point blank what I hope is already clear: *Though agrarianism proposes that everybody has agrarian responsibilities, it does not propose that everyone should be a farmer or that we do not need cities*” (Citizenship Papers 121, emphasis added), and that “learning farming is like learning an art; it takes a long time, and a lot of careful work” (Grubbs 8).

Berry’s work (both his writing and farming) draws from a reservoir of insights gathered from a lifetime of studying the cultural repositories of literature and scripture, wisdom inherited from fellow community members, from personal experience gleaned from his committed interaction with his chosen place, and from other thinkers and farmers around the world. Rather than becoming bound by provincialism, Berry recognizes a complex fabric of connections that interweave his place and his thinking with the larger world. Far from a strict provincialism, in interacting with and observing his land along the Kentucky River, Berry notes that “the geography of this patch of riverbank takes in much of the geography of the world...the geography of this place is airy and starry as well as earthy and watery. It has been arrived at from a thousand other places, some as faraway as the poles” (Long-Legged House 163). Attuned to the connections between his place and the larger world, Berry is able to “look out my window and see the world” (163). Berry resists the idea of “thinking globally,” characterizing this familiar environmental mantra as a dangerous abstraction and “a distraction from thinking” (Grubbs 115), yet maintains that “if we could think locally, we would take far better care of things than we do now. The right local questions will be the

right global ones” (Sex 19). While literally grounded in (and according to Berry a product of) the land of his Kentucky farm, Berry’s thought is widely applicable because its general principles address fundamental questions and difficulties encountered by all humans striving to live meaningfully and harmoniously in community in place within the context of a world which seems at once beautiful, benevolent, unpredictable, and dangerous.

## THE PREEMINENT AGRARIAN: WENDELL BERRY AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AGRARIANISM

### Wendell Berry and the Rise of Neo-Agrarianism

Law professor Eric Freyfogle notes that “with no fanfare and indeed with hardly much public notice, agrarianism is again on the rise” (xxiii). David Orr characterizes Berry as “the preeminent agrarian,” and recognizes Berry’s formative role in this renewal of interest in agrarianism, stating that “from Hesiod to the present no one has represented the agrarian cause with greater eloquence, logic, or consistency” (Uses of Prophecy 171). Orr notes that “Concern to preserve farms and farmland is evident in recent citizen initiatives across the country. The market for organic food is rising by double digits each year. Gardening programs exist in virtual every major city and in many schools. The sustainable agriculture movement, if not yet a significant political force, has grown steadily for three decades.” (177). Several popular works heralding agrarian ideas have also recently garnered popular interest. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver’s recent work, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, details her family’s attempt at eating locally and producing a significant share of their own food. Kingsolver acknowledges Berry’s influence, stating that “everything we’ve said here, Wendell said it first, in a quiet voice that makes the mountains tremble” (Kingsolver 352). Michael Pollan’s popular work *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* traces the production, distribution, and consumption of common American foodstuffs, examining the social, environmental, and

ethical implications of industrialized agriculture. Contrasting modern industrialized farming with farms run according to “a political and aesthetic stance...descended from Virgil through Jefferson... [that is] alive and, if not well exactly, still useful, even necessary” (125). Pollan shares many common viewpoints with Berry and approvingly cites him on several occasions. These developments seem to indicate a groundswell of interest in the “agrarian argument” Berry has been championing for decades.

Despite recent cause for hope, Berry and other neo-agrarians still face formidable challenges. Neo-agrarianism opposes the industrialized agricultural system (as well as industrial capitalism generally) which has developed in the United States since the end of the Second World War and that has been rapidly spreading abroad—particularly in developing countries (Shiva 121-139). The now predominate industrial system, based on cheap fossil fuels, the comodification of nature, the need to “get big or get out,” powerful corporate influence, and heavy government subsidies, has appeased “the public’s demand for a diet that is at once cheap and luxurious” (Berry, Sex 31). While this system has been lucrative for “agribusiness” corporations, agrarians believe that it has been devastating to the vital cultural and ecological health of the countryside, to the health of all who consume industrial agriculture’s products, and all who suffer from its pollutants (Pollan 100-108).

Berry and the neo-agrarians challenge the status quo of global corporate industrialism—which Berry considers a latter-day incarnation of the past colonialism of European monarchies (Citizenship Papers 144)—questioning its basic premises and contrasting industrial ethics and ideals with those of agrarianism: the industrial ideal of unlimited growth and acquisition with the agrarian ethic of sufficiency, and the industrial

tendency toward competition with the agrarian ideal of cooperation and integration.

Berry claims that “agrarianism...is a culture at the same that it is an economy [whereas] industrialism is an economy before it is a culture” (116). According to Berry, agrarianism is a culture that inherently produces a certain type of economy and an economy that reciprocally preserves and reinforces agrarian culture. Conversely, industrial culture is created in the image of and is subservient to the industrial economy. Either way, Berry perceives an intimate link between culture and economics—economic ideals and perspectives invariably manifest themselves in cultural practice. Berry notes that “to the bewilderment of ‘conservatives,’” the ideals of the industrial economy such as unlimited competition, unlimited growth, and the encouragement of “exorbitant or inordinate wants...cannot be confined to the ‘marketplace’” (Standing by Words 179). Since industrial culture simply mirrors the industrial economy, it is inevitably saturated with destructive industrial principles and tendencies.

For Berry, the wholesale application of industrial principles to human culture entails dire consequences. Unlimited competition, for example, “as a ruling principle and a virtue, imposes a logic that is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible to control” (Home Economics 72). According to Berry, the ideal of competition,

always implies, and in fact requires that any community must be divided into a class of winners and a class of losers... [however] the defenders of the ideal of competition have never known what to do with or for the losers. The losers simply accumulate in human dumps, like stores of industrial waste, until they gain enough misery and strength to overpower the winners (What are People For? 130-131).

Further, Berry believes the ideal of competition results in detrimental individualism, alienation, and dependence on entities whose primary concern is monetary profit rather than the integrity of land and communities: “[unlimited competition] does not hesitate at

the destruction of the life of a family or the life of a community. It pits neighbor against neighbor as readily as it pits buyer against seller. Every transaction is *meant* to involve a winner and a loser. And for this reason the human economy is pitted without limit against nature” (131).

Berry’s “agrarian argument” challenges cultural norms shaped by industrial economic theory and practice which have become ingrained in the modern psyche and institutionalized in current education and religion. Berry claims that the “victory of industrialism over agrarianism” (46) allowed industrialism to dominate the lives of the majority of Americans, and that industrialism’s destructive influence is now being spread abroad by global corporate colonialism. While raising the standard of living for many within developed nations, Berry notes that industrialism has failed to produce the promised “Earthly Paradise...invented and built by human intelligence and industry...and by machines” (Unsettling of America 55) that, according to Bacon, “would provide the means for improving the human economic estate...making us all rich beyond counting” (Worster 170). To the contrary, Berry argues that the legacy of industrialism is a trail of poverty, disintegrated communities, and destroyed or poisoned ecosystems. Further, Berry asserts that industrialism’s “most marketed commodity...satisfaction...is never delivered” (Citizenship Papers 113). This sentiment is echoed by anthropologist Wade Davis, who notes that many individuals in ‘developing’ countries are “seduced by empty promises,” and forsake traditional cultural and community ties and contexts for the sake of modernization. According to Davis, these individuals often find themselves on “the bottom rung of an economic ladder that goes nowhere” (156,157).



Despite its overwhelming dominance, Berry believes that the failure of large-scale industrial agriculture is inevitable given that it is based on the shaky foundation of a diminishing supply of cheap fossil fuels and that it has been “spending the natural capital built up over thousands of years in the soil” (Sex 143). For agrarians, the question is not whether the present system will fail but whether it will fail quickly and catastrophically or slowly, allowing a transition to “agricultural systems based upon the use of human energy and local resources” which Berry believes “could survive the sort of crisis that many of them already have survived, whereas the present American system of agriculture will fail if the fuel tanks run dry” (Gift of Good Land 95). Berry’s hope is that the system will “fail into a restoration of community life—that is, into an understanding of our need to help and comfort each other” (137). Berry’s view of the inevitable failure of industrial agriculture (and the present industrial economy) is shared by intellectual inheritors such as Orr who warns that “If the transition from fossil fuels to sunlight is made badly, without foresight or planning...it could well mean supply interruptions, shortages of one kind or another and economic collapse” (Earth in Mind 188). Like Berry, Orr proposes a rediscovery of “tried-and-true ways of doing things” (195), a “twenty-first century agrarianism” that includes sustainable agriculture and forestry, re-thinking transportation, economies of place, reinhabiting “rural areas in an orderly, knowledgeable, and sustainable fashion,” and a “greening” of cities “to fit more closely their surrounding regions” (195-202).

Not simply content to await the anticipated demise of the oil-fueled industrial economy, neo-agrarians have begun to promote alternative economies of direct-marketing which “sell their products directly to food customers through various

marketing arrangements—farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture arrangements (CSAs), direct sales off the farm, home deliveries, and various Internet networks that directly link producers and consumers” (Kirschenmann 102-103). While these direct-market farms “remain a tiny portion of the food and agriculture system” (103), they have increased significantly. Yet while this new market offers hope to small farmers and a renewal of more sustainable small-scale agriculture, a looming challenge is that the new market “will be quickly co-opted by larger competitors with more economic clout” (Donahue 44). This tendency is documented in Pollan’s account of “Big Organic”—large scale organic farms that produce organic products for large corporate retailers such as Whole Foods (134-184).

Agrarian advocates however point to economic studies indicating a shift toward “a conversational marketplace” in which rather than simply being sold to, customers increasingly seek opportunities to have a “conversation” about what they are buying (Kirschenmann 112). These studies also indicate a shift in which consumers favor “trustworthy and authentic producers and products” and a “close to home connection” (112). Neo-agrarians argue that in such a climate, “it becomes extremely difficult for large consolidated firms, whose marketing advantage is based on being the lowest cost supplier of an undifferentiated, mass-produced commodity to provide such marketing relationships,” so that “the comparative advantage consequently goes to the agrarian farmers of the future” (114). Yet while public interest in direct marketing and in relationships with local farmers has thus far proven a boon to current proponents of agrarian ideals, whether large corporations will be successful in capitalizing on market

shifts, co-opting or mimicking agrarian ideals and extending their hegemonic influence into current agrarian modes of production and distribution remains to be seen.

Also not simply content to sit idly aside while the market takes its course, as the preeminent voice of neo-agrarianism Berry offers agrarian alternatives to the industrial ideals of unlimited growth and competition. Berry's alternative to the industrial ideal of unlimited industrial competition is a cooperative culture of neighbors whose "concerns and enterprises are not fragmented, scattered out, at variance or in contention with one other," but in which neighbors recognize their mutual interdependence, and in which "the people and their work and their country are members of each other and of the culture" (Unsettling of America 47). Members of Berry's cooperative culture would not only cooperate with each other, but strive to cooperate with nature and its processes rather than attempting to control or "conquer" it (Continuous Harmony 94). Berry's ideal of cooperative culture operates primarily on a local scale and is based on what Berry characterizes as the first principle of a local economy: the trust and responsibility of neighbors, people who know and care for one another and whose interest is in maintaining the well being of their community and place.

Maintaining the importance of private property ownership, Berry is careful to distinguish his cooperative agrarianism from socialism which he considers no better than industrial capitalism in preserving the land and rural places: "Communists and capitalists are alike in their contempt for country people, country life, and country places. They have exploited the countryside with equal greed and disregard" (Another Turn of the Crank 15-16). This is sentiment echoed by environmental historian Donald Worster: "The human economy requires for its long-term success that its architects acknowledge their

dependence on the greater economy of nature, preserving its health and respecting its benefits. By this standard every modern economy, whether built on the principles of Adam Smith or Karl Marx, is an unmitigated disaster” (175; McNeil 131-134).

Examples of neighbors engaging in common work in Berry’s fiction shed light on his sense of a cooperative culture. Much of the work in Berry’s fictional Port William is performed communally by neighbors: “here [in Port William]...neighbors were always working together” (That Distant Land 200). Communal work provides opportunities for men, women, and children of various families to socialize and to learn— and for elders to pass along farming techniques and agri-culture to the young (200-201). Berry’s sense of shared work is a type of currency, a medium of exchange binding neighbors through mutual interdependence, as Wheeler Catlett explains to Elton Penn: “you don’t send a bill. You don’t, if you can help it, keep an account. Once the account is kept, and the bill presented, the friendship ends, the neighborhood is finished.” (288). Berry is careful not to glamorize or romanticize the farm work done by neighbors in his fiction, which he portrays as often repetitive and physically demanding, yet, contrary to what Berry believes has become a widespread social stigmatization of all physical work as degrading drudgery (What are People for? 141), his portrayal of common work is not pure misery and is often accompanied by games, laughter, conversation, and singing (A Place on Earth 259-260).

Berry’s essays provide examples of communal work, describing the social work of past residents of his native Port Royal, Kentucky: “These people worked hard...their work was mingled with their amusement; sometimes it was their amusement. Talk was very important: They worked together and talked” (Home Economics 182). Amish author

David Kline describes similar social work amongst his “supportive community,” and speaks of the pleasures he draws from such work such as working in a diverse landscape, seeing abundant wildlife, and a working at a leisurely pace allowing “quiet time: a time to listen to God and his Creation” (193). Berry contrasts social cooperative work to industrial agriculture which uses workers as if they were machines or slaves (Unsettling of America 139; Life is a Miracle 6; Citizenship Papers 161-162).

Most of Berry’s examples of a culture of neighborly cooperation involve care and work between farm families or between local producers and local consumers, which begs the question of outside trade: how would a focus on local cooperation between neighbors translate into interactions extending beyond the limits of the local region or even between countries? Berry acknowledges that “of course, everything needed locally cannot be produced locally,” necessitating trade with neighboring communities (and by inference neighboring countries), but asserts that “The principle of neighborhood at home always implies the principle of charity abroad” (Citizenship Papers 75). For Berry, the health and prosperity of the local economy is the necessary basis of fair and mutually beneficial trade abroad: “[the local economy] does not import products that it can produce for itself. And it does not export local products until local needs have been met. The economic products of a viable community are understood either as belonging to the community’s subsistence or as surplus, and only the surplus is considered to be marketed abroad” (75). Berry advocates replacing colonial economies in which peripheral communities exist solely to export raw materials to a distant center—which Berry characterizes as destructive of local economies, culture, and ecosystems (Home Economics 186; Another Turn of the Crank 54)—with economies in which local needs

are met first and only surplus is exported. This leads to Berry's next principle of local economy: subsistence, and the accompanying ethic of sufficiency.

Berry's agrarian economy is first and foremost a subsistence economy. For Berry, subsistence farming means meeting household and local needs before export, which he believes "is the very definition of good farming" (Gift of Good Land 10). Observing the increasingly common yet "utterly strange" (Way of Ignorance 97) phenomenon of farmers producing large amounts of food for export while purchasing their own food at a supermarket "just like city people" (Gift of Good Land 124), Berry believes that farmers (as well as nonfarmers) should be as self-sufficient in their own food production as possible rather than relying on "outside sources that must be purchased" (74). Such self-sufficiency was Berry's goal when he moved to his farm: "I intend to raise on my own land enough food for my family. Within the obvious limitations, I want my home to be a self-sufficient place" (Long-Legged House 88). For Berry, this principle also extends to urban areas: "At every level of the agricultural system, the subsistence principle should operate. The local consumer population in towns and cities should subsist, as much as possible, from the produce of the locality or region" (Home Economics 125). Berry points to examples of past cities that produced much of their own food supply: "at one time town and city lots routinely included garden space and often included pens and buildings to accommodate milk cows, fattening hogs, and flocks of poultry" (Unsettling of America 31; Steinberg 157-172).

Recent commentary on Berry's ideas—particularly post-9/11 and hurricane Katrina—recognizes the wisdom of self-sufficiency and shorter supply lines: "a stable food system, much like a stable and resilient habitat, depends on a variety of crops grown

over diverse landscapes....History has shown repeatedly that as regions grow and consume their own food and rely as little as possible on food imports, their food supply becomes more secure” (Wirzba, Why Agrarianism Matters 13). An example of the failure to do so is chronicled by in Jared Diamond in his observations of the collapse of the Anasazi society at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, who after exhausting the agricultural and timber potential of their own place came to rely fully on the importation of vital supplies from “outlying satellite settlements” (Diamond 149). According to Diamond, this precarious dependence on outside sources of basic necessities such as food became a key factor in Chaco’s demise.

According to Orr, “A society fed by a few megafarms is far more vulnerable to many kinds of disruption than one with many smaller and widely dispersed farms....An ecological view of security would lead us to rebuild family farms, local enterprises, community prosperity, and regional economies” (9-11 289). In his older works, (Long-Legged House 88; Gift of Good Land 74, published in 1969 and 1981, respectively), Berry defended his ideas of subsistence farming and local supply against critics who might dismiss his proposals as “quaint” or “nostalgic.” His more recent writings however contain no such anticipated defense, but present his ideas as effective tools of security—national and otherwise:

We now have a clear, inescapable choice that we must make. We can continue to promote a global economic system of unlimited “free trade,” among corporations, held together by long and highly vulnerable lines of communication and supply, but *now* recognizing that such a system will have to be protected by a hugely expensive police force that will be worldwide...or we can promote a decentralized world economy what would have the aim of assuring to every nation and region a *local* self-sufficiency in life-supporting goods. This would not eliminate international trade, but it would tend toward a trade in surpluses after local needs have been met. (Citizenship Papers 19)

While Berry has always been confident in his “agrarian argument,” the above excerpt from “Thoughts in the Presence of Fear” (2001), which deals with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, employs statements such as “We now have a clear, inescapable choice,” and an italicized “*now*” to lend rhetorical urgency to his case for shortening supply lines, and to present his ideas as appropriate and pragmatic alternatives to extended supply lines made increasingly dangerous by threats such as natural disasters and global terrorism.

Finally, Berry’s agrarian economy is characterized by an ethic of sufficiency. Past Christian traditions were grounded in Biblical injunctions “against avarice and self-aggrandizement” (Deneen 303). Further, “large accumulations of land were, and are, forbidden because the dispossession and privation of some cannot be acceptable or the normal result of the economic activity of others, for that...destroys the community” (Berry What are People for? 99). According to Locke however, with the invention of money, “a contrivance that allowed humans to circumvent the onetime limitation on accumulation...unlimited acquisition became both possible and desirable” (Deneen 302). Enshrined in the industrial capitalist mantra of “infinite growth,” and designed to “[offer a] material means of fulfilling a spiritual...craving” (Unsettling of America 94), according to Berry, “we honor greed and waste with the name of economy...and we sanctify all this as Christian, though the Gospels support none of it by so much as a line or word” (Way of Ignorance 147). Yet according to Berry, the end result of the modern sanctified industrial economy is a condition in which “we have many commodities, but little satisfaction, little sense of the sufficiency of anything” (Citizenship Papers 113), and in which the modern consumer “is probably the most unhappy average citizen in the



history of the world...for all his leisure and recreation, he feels bad, he looks bad, he is overweight, his health is poor” (Unsettling of America 20).

Berry attempts to revive the tradition of sufficiency by promoting an ideal of “the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption” (Home Economics 72), and by posing the evocative question: “How much is enough?” (Gift of Good Land 142). Berry extols the examples of individuals and groups who have adopted a sufficiency ethic such as a group of Andean farmers whose “governing concept of agriculture...is *enough*, a long-term sufficiency” (Unsettling of America 176), and small farmers who “begin ‘to rise up,’ not to ‘the top,’ but to a sufficiency of ability and goods” (What are People for? 27). Berry affirms that a state of “total consumption” results not only in “a state of helpless dependence on things and services and ideas and motives that we have forgotten how to provide ourselves,” but like other conservation thinkers, that “all meaningful contact between ourselves and the earth is broken” and that destruction of the natural world is inevitable (Continuous Harmony 74). Berry believes that material acquisition and happiness are not codependent (126), and he promotes a renewal of the bonds to family, community, God, and to the natural world as fulfilling alternatives to what he perceives as the false promises of joy and satisfaction in consumerism marketed by the industrial economy.

To realize his agrarian vision Berry proposes a fruitful alliance between conservationists and agrarians. Declaring himself a “conservationist... [and] a wilderness advocate” (165) (preferring the term “conservationist” to “environmentalist”), Berry supports the conservationist goal of preserving wilderness and has published various essays justifying the need for wilderness preservation (Unsettling of America 29-30, 130;

Gift of Good Land 178; Standing by Words 194; Home Economics 17, 146). Berry criticizes the current conservation movement however for its failure to adequately address economics, noting that “the most significant weakness of the conservation movement is its failure to produce or espouse an economic idea capable of correcting the economic idea of the industrialists” (114). In failing to espouse an alternative economic model, most conservation concerns seem therefore “exterior to daily life” (123). Berry therefore calls for a “countervailing economic idea by which we might correct [industrialism],” and declares that “we will not have to look hard to find it, for there is only one, and that is agrarianism” (Citizenship Papers 115). Lamenting the “tragic” and “unnecessary” conflict between conservationists, farmers, and ranchers, Berry calls for a partnership between conservationists and agrarians against a common adversary:

I think the two sides need to enter into *one* conversation. They have got to talk to one another. Conservationists have got to know and deal competently with the methods and economics of land use. Land users have got to recognize the urgency, even the economic urgency, of the requirements of conservation. Failing this, these two sides will simply concede an easy victory to their common enemy, the third side, the corporate totalitarianism which is now rapidly consolidating as “the global economy” and which will utterly dominate both the natural world and its human communities. (174)

Berry believes “the effort of conservation could be enlarged and strengthened” (122) by an alliance with agrarianism, and that people and organizations “now working to save something of value... [such as] agricultural land, family farms and ranches, communities, children and childhood, local schools, local communities, local food markets, livestock breeds and domestic plant varieties, fine old buildings, scenic roads, and so on” are often battling “the same enemies as the conservation movement,” and the two movements are therefore in fact “natural allies” (124).

An Alliance with Caesar: Berry on Education and Religion

While much of Berry's criticism targets "the global industrialism of the corporations" (Citizenship Papers 122), Berry also levels critiques at modern educational systems and mainstream Christianity for ignoring, abetting, and perpetuating the destructive effects of the industrial economy. According to Berry, by perpetuating a transient culture of "urban nomads," modern education undercuts the integrity and possibility of durable community life. According to Berry, modern education operates under the assumption that community has no value "that *counts* in any practical or powerful way" (What are People for? 179). With dominant cultural ideals defining successful individuals as "'upwardly mobile' transients," free of community ties, and "who will permit no stay or place to interrupt their personal advance," Berry laments the tendency, particularly in rural areas, for colleges and universities to "uproot the best brains and talents, to direct them away from home into exploitative careers in one or another of the professions, and so to make them predators of communities and homelands, their own as well as other people's" (Home Economics 51).

Berry believes that this rural (and urban) "brain drain" is both a function of cultural ideals that promote individual upward mobility at the expense of communities and "a powerful superstition that people and conditions are improved inevitably by education" (Sex 24). This sentiment is echoed by Orr who notes that "conventional wisdom holds that all education is good, and that the more of it one has, the better," and who along with Berry believes that "without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth" (Earth in Mind 5). Rather than being inherently beneficial, education may in fact become highly destructive of the

community which it often professes to “serve”—a tendency noted by Davis who claims that while education is often “held out as the key to modernization” in developing nations, if it is not tailored to the needs of local communities, modern education is often catastrophic to indigenous peoples in that it often results in young people abandoning their family ties and traditional cultures only to seek work in already overcrowded cities (155-157).

Berry believes that modern education fails to produce its promised improvements because of its failure to perform what he sees as its function: “to serve—both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit” (Home Economics 52). Berry also believes that modern education fails to fulfill its role “to preserve and pass on the essential human means—the thoughts and words and works and ways and standards and hopes without which we are not human” (88-89). Berry accuses modern educational institutions of educating young people to permanently leave their home communities and to disregard their cultural inheritances. For Berry, modern education has simply become commodified and government subsidized job training, “something to be *bought* in order to make money” (52). Berry believes that educational institutions have abetted industrial ideals by putting young people on “career tracks” which tend to send them away from their home places and turn their attention from the immediate needs of local communities to the abstractions of industrial economics. He describes educational institutions as factories whose “products” are individuals free of community ties and prepared to take their places in the machinery of the industrial economy: “education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, either by job-training or by

industry-subsidized research. Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible” (Citizenship Papers 21).

It must be noted however that Berry’s call for education to serve its local community and his criticism of educational and cultural norms that encourage young people (particularly from rural backgrounds) to permanently leave their home communities does not mean that he advocates a highly parochial worldview in which young people would never step outside the bounds of their home communities. Berry himself temporarily left his homeland to complete part of his education at Stanford and lived for two years on a Guggenheim fellowship in Florence, Italy. While living in Italy, Berry observed “a way of farming that was lovingly adapted to its place. It was highly diversified. It wasted nothing. It was scaled to permit close attention to details. It was beautiful.” (175). He describes his time in Italy as “profoundly instructive” (176) and pivotal in his decision to return to his home place. Since his settling in Kentucky, Berry has returned to Europe and has also travelled to South America to observe forms of agriculture which he has found instructional and inspiring.

Rather than an often caricatured version of Berry’s ideas in which young people are permanently and inescapably bound to the drudgery and “intellectual death” (Long-Legged House, 175) of their home communities, Berry points to the traditional theme of return in which “throughout most of our literature, the normal thing was for the generations to succeed one another in place” citing examples such as Odysseus’ desire to return home after the exploits of Troy, the Old Testament parable of the prodigal son, and Wordsworth’s “Michael” as examples of the norm of return in the Western literary cannon (What are People for? 160-162). Joseph Campbell confirms this theme in his

account of the archetypal hero who journeys into the perils and wonders of the outside world yet who ultimately returns to his community with a boon gained from the outside: “The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community” (Campbell 179). Rather than a magical elixir, in Berry’s argument boons gained by young people in their sojourn into the world and which are in turn brought back for the benefit of the community include proper education (which recognizes and values community), insights and inspiration gained from other communities, and an appreciation for diversity which would work to curb tendencies toward xenophobia or provincialism and to create not simply communities, but “*good* communities” (Grubbs 102).

According to Berry, the ancient theme of return has been “forgotten or repudiated” in favor of a “new norm,” “institutionalized not in great communal stories, but in the educational system” in which young people leave their home places (both rural and urban) and do not return—“the child’s destiny is not to succeed the parents, but to outmode them” (What are People for? 162). According to the new norm, “schools are no longer oriented to a cultural inheritance that it is their duty to pass on unimpaired, but to the career, which is to say the future, of the child” (162-163). In this new mode, “parents...are now finding their children an encumbrance at home” (163), the old are simply jettisoned as useless, past their time of “social utility” (Continuous Harmony 135). Rather than mutual interdependence, “people are no longer useful to one another... [and] the centripetal force of family and community fails, and people fall into dependence on

exterior economies and organizations” (What are People for? 164). Like Orr, who advocates a reformed education that seeks to understand its effects “on real people and their communities” (Earth in Mind 13), Berry seeks to reform educational systems to recognize their responsibility to serve local communities and to fulfilling their role in a norm of return.

In addition to current educational systems, Berry faults contemporary Christianity for its divorce of economic concerns from morality. In his discussion of the rise of materialistic economic thinking and its role in “the modern environmental crisis,” eminent environmental historian Donald Worster notes that historically,

Religion, on the whole, acted to check that materialism, to question human arrogance, and to hold in fearful suspicion the dangerous powers of greed. Religion, including Christianity, stood firmly against a reductive, mechanistic view of the world. It pointed to a subordinate and restrained role for humans in the cosmos. And, most importantly for the sake of the biosphere, it taught people that there are higher purposes in life than consumption (176).

Despite whatever resistance Christianity may have historically voiced to the ideals embraced by Adam Smith-inspired industrial capitalism, Berry notes that “organized Christianity seems, in general, to have made peace with ‘the economy’ by divorcing itself from economic issues” (What are People for? 95). Yet while much of contemporary Christianity may divorce itself from taking moral stands on economic issues, according to Berry the “organized” church “is economically compelled” to make peace with “the military-industrial economy and its ‘scientific’ destruction of life” (Sex 99): “Like any other public institution so organized, the organized church is dependant on ‘the economy’; it cannot survive apart from those economic practices that its truth forbids and its vocation is to correct” (What are People for? 96). Berry notes that “if it

comes to a choice between the extermination of the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field and the extermination of a building fund, the organized church will elect—indeed, has already elected—to save the building fund,” musing that “No wonder so many sermons are devoted exclusively to ‘spiritual’ subjects” (96).

In his indictment of contemporary Christianity, Berry criticizes the concept of a paid clergy and accuses the church of “excerpt[ing] sanctity from the human economy” by allowing “the professional class...to serve itself in its work and to serve God by giving the church its ten percent” (96). Berry states (somewhat cynically) that the church generally does not concern itself with what type of work is done outside its doors, or how destructive that work may be of the sanctity of the creation as long as members are making regular contributions. For Berry, the result of the separation of morality from work is that modern Christianity, for the most part, has “stood silently by while a predatory economy has ravaged the world, destroyed its natural beauty and health, divided and plundered its human communities and households” (Sex 115). Berry makes the stinging accusation that its own fundamental doctrines to the contrary, “[modern Christianity] has flown the flag and chanted the slogans of empire. It has assumed with the economists that ‘economic forces’ automatically work for good....It has assumed with almost everybody that ‘progress’ is good, that it is good to be modern and up with the times. It has admired Caesar and comforted him in his depredations and defaults” (115). Noting that despite Christianity being “fashionable at present in the United States...I know of no Christian nation and no Christian leader from whose conduct the teachings of Christ could be inferred” (Peacemakers 3-4), and that “in its de facto alliance with Caesar, Christianity connives directly in the murder of Creation” (Sex 115).



Despite his profound critiques of contemporary Christianity's divorce of spirituality from economics and its neglect of the creation, Berry declares himself "a man of faith," (Way of Ignorance 128; Grubbs 78), and places profound hope in the possibilities of Christianity. Despite his criticisms of organized religion, he believes that individuals should not slip into a "church of one," which for Berry is simply another form of individualism (Continuous Harmony 9). Like fellow agrarian Wes Jackson who believes that "an individual should work out his religious life within the context of his own culture" (Jackson 66), Berry does not believe in simply abandoning Christianity in favor of religious traditions that seem more ecologically salutary, stating that,

there are an enormous number of people—and I am one of them—whose native religion, for better or worse, is Christianity. We are born to it; we began to learn about it before we became conscious; it is, whatever we think of it, an intimate belonging of our being; it informs our consciousness, our language and our dreams. We can turn away from it or against it, but that will only bind us tightly to a reduced version of it. (Sex 95-96)

Rather than simply abandoning Christianity for greener Eastern or indigenous spiritual pastures, Berry advocates a Christian renewal grounded in its own foundational texts (while allowing informative influences) in light of pressing ecological realities and challenges.

Religious studies scholar Thomas Berry points to a series of transcendences which he believes shift Christianity's focus from the immediate physical world to a distant ethereal realm and cause a "pervasive resentment against the human condition" (Thomas Berry 28). Similarly, Wendell Berry believes "that Christianity, as usually presented by its organizations, is not *earthy* enough," and that rather than operating wholly within an intangible "spiritual" realm, "a valid spiritual life, in this world, must

have a practice and a practicality—it must have a material result” (Gift of Good Land 267). In imagining a more “earthy” Christianity Berry points to the challenge of a deeply seated dualism, “a radical discontinuity between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, and so on” (Sex 105). This dualism, manifested in its most fundamental version as the dualism of body and soul is, according to Berry, “the most destructive disease that afflicts us” (105). Predicated on a hierarchy of the spirit over the body, or the spiritual over the physical, Berry notes that the physical is held in contempt as inferior and may be destroyed “for ‘salvation,’ for profit, for ‘victory,’ or for fun” (107).

Berry advocates a renewed appreciation for the physical based in part on a rereading of foundational Biblical texts. Genesis 2:7 states that “The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul.” Afflicted with a hierarchical dualism of body over soul, Berry concludes that many have read this verse to signify that humans consist of a physical body into which a soul “like a letter into an envelope” has been placed, represented by the formula “man = body + soul” (106). However, Berry reads this passage as God “[forming] the man of dust, then, by breathing His breath into it, He made the dust live” (106). The dust, therefore, “formed as man and made to live, did not *embody* a soul; it *became* a soul,” the ontology of man more accurately represented by the formula “soul = dust + breath” (106). For Berry, “humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery” (106). Conceiving of the dust (representative of the otherwise despised “physical”) as an

integral part of the “living soul” Berry views it as a divine gift to be revered rather than a curse to be despised or exploited.

Berry’s reverence for “the dust” of creation is reflected in his reverence for the human body, the body of other creatures, and the topsoil which he refers to as “very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness...it is enriched by all things that die and enter into it...its fertility is always building up out of death into promise” (Long-Legged House 204). For Berry, soil, like humans and all other forms of life, is an amalgamation of dust and life that is both divine gift and life-giving mystery. The membership of Berry’s fictional Port William, strive to fulfill their roles as “trustee[s] of the life of the topsoil” (Continuous Harmony 128) honoring it as a gift “that we didn’t make,” and preserving it for the benefit of “the line of succession” (That Distant Land 228). Contrasted to a local “preacher” who attempts to console the Feltner family after the loss of their son with promises of a “Heavenly City,” transcendent and “free of the world” (A Place on Earth 99), members of Berry’s fictional community believe in God and an afterlife, yet strive to be faithful to their “place on earth,” recognizing its challenges and dangers while taking solace in its sustaining power, its beauty, and its pleasures. Wirzba describes this “faithfulness to the world” as the willingness “to trust and accept responsibility for the gifted and graced character of experience, to immerse ourselves into the flow of experience and there find ourselves maintained by meaning and love that we do not control, and for the most part, do not deserve” (Placing the Soul 95). This sentiment is echoed by Berry’s character Wheeler Catlett who describes the community’s beloved land as “not purely good...but good enough, better than we deserve” (That Distant Land 355).

Tracing religious and philosophical conceptions between the relationship of the soul and the surrounding world through time, Wirzba describes a tension between two Christian conceptions of the world: the first, “borrowing heavily from the Hebrew faith out of which Christianity grew,” in which “God has created a world that is good and to be cherished as an expression of worship and gratitude to God,” and the other in which the world “is the site of so much sin and wrong-doing that it needs to be transformed (perhaps destroyed) and rebuilt so that it might better reflect God’s intention and rule” (84). Berry believes that within mainstream Christianity the latter view of the world has virtually eclipsed the former, yet the sense of the world as gift to be cherished is justified by scriptures, more so than the idea of a debased physical world—which he believes has played conveniently into the instrumental view of nature espoused by industrial capitalism. Berry seeks to tip the scale back toward a reverence for the world. Rather than “lofty souls trapped temporarily in lowly bodies in a dispirited, desperate, unlovable world,” Berry strives to reinvigorate Christian belief that “we are living souls, God’s dust and God’s breath, acting our parts among other creatures all made of the same dust and breath as ourselves” (Sex 109-110).

Berry dismisses arguments that insist on “the culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and the uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction” (Sex 93-94) as shallow clichés of the conservation movement and cites Lynn White’s seminal article “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” as the most popular and widely read example of such an argument. Berry accuses such arguments of relying too heavily on Biblical injunctions found in the book of Genesis giving humans “dominion” over creation with a charge to “subdue” the earth. Berry notes that

considered within the context of the Biblical creation narrative, these injunctions “can give us only limited help” since they were “given to Adam and Eve in the time of their innocence, and it seems certain that the word ‘subdue’ would have had a different intent and sense for them at that time than it could have for them, or for us, after the Fall” (Gift of Good Land 268). Like other modern Christian thinkers, Berry attempts to reinterpret what has often been characterized as Genesis’ God-given license to destructively dominate nature citing Mormon essayist Hugh Nibley who wrote that “man’s dominion is a call to service, not a license to exterminate” (What are People for? 99). Berry believes that critics (as well as Christians) who dwell on the idea of “dominion” as free use “have not mastered the first rule of the criticism of books: you have to read them before you criticize them” (Sex 94) since Berry believes that a reading of Genesis as granting “unconditional permission to humankind to use the world as it pleases is...contradicted by virtually all the rest of the Bible” (What are People for? 98).

In an effort to find a more useful Biblical model of human interaction with the world than Genesis, Berry looks to the story of the giving of the Promised Land to the ancient Israelites which he believes to be more “serviceable” since it is a story of “a divine gift to a *fallen* people,” and for Berry represents “the definition of an ecological discipline” (Gift of Good Land 269). First and foremost Berry points to Israel’s sense of the land as gift, “not a free or deserved gift, but a gift given upon certain rigorous conditions” (270). Israel is allowed to possess the land, but must remember that they did not create it and are given strict warnings against “the folly of saying that ‘My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth’ (Deuteronomy 8:17)” (270). Berry believes that deeply implicated in the very definition of a gift of good land “is a specific

warning against *hubris* which is the great ecological sin,” and that the Promised Land is not a permanent gift, but is given only for a time, and only for so long as it is *properly* used” (270-271, emphasis added).

For ancient Israel, reminders of the proper use of gifted land were included in its elaborate Sabbath observances including a command to allow fields to lie fallow every seventh year, “and a Sabbath of Sabbaths every fifteenth year, a ‘year of jubilee,’ during which...the land would be returned to its original owners, as if to free it of the taint of trade and the conceit of human ownership” (271). Israel was to recognize that the land must not be considered a reward since “the people chosen for this gift do not deserve it, for they are ‘a stiff-necked people’ who have been wicked and faithless” (271). According to Berry, Israel could only prove itself worthy of the land by being “faithful, grateful, and humble,” and by being neighborly, “they must be just, kind to one another, generous to strangers, honest in trading, etc.” (272). And while these seem only social virtues, Berry recognizes their deep “ecological and agricultural implications” since the community is understood to exist not just in space, but also in time, and that Israel must take care of its land, “which is never a possession, but an inheritance to the living, as it will be to the unborn” (272).

Berry also recognizes in ancient Israel’s connection to its land “an elaborate understanding of charity” a charity not limited to fellow Israelites, but expanded in the New Testament to include all creation: “It cannot be selective because between any two humans, or any two creatures, all Creation exists as a bond... [charity] cannot stop until it includes all Creation, for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is dependent, and it is a contradiction to love your neighbor and despise the great

inheritance on which life depends” (273). Berry’s argument of the extension of Christ’s command of neighborly love to the natural world joins a chorus of similar Christian thought found in the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi and Albert Schweitzer as well as by more recent Christian thinkers: “To love our neighbors as ourselves has implicit ecological content....Christ called followers to grow in love by extending the boundaries of their sense of community and kinship...to embrace all peoples, even their enemies....By further extension the call to love one’s neighbor can be seen to include a sense of kinship with the entire community of life” (Mische 594).

Differing from those who dismiss Christian theology and ethics as useless to correct environmental destruction, or who overtly or implicitly call for believing Christians to abandon their faith in favor of religious or philosophical systems which are perceived as more ecologically salutary, Berry seeks to bring to light and to reinvigorate an alternative Christian tradition born of the same scriptures and teachings yet radically different in its approach to the natural world. This possibility is tacitly recognized by Lynn White in his regard for the tradition and teachings of St. Francis whom he characterizes as “the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ” (13). Although White concludes that St. Francis’ push for a more charitable treatment of nature failed in his own time, a recent Christian cultural renaissance in which Berry has played a significant role (and in which St. Francis was made the patron saint of ecology by Pope John Paul II), demonstrates that St. Francis’ legacy is far from extinct and that a sophisticated and ecologically informed Christian environmental ethic may in fact spring from the same scriptural font as an environmentally destructive one—a possibility that is

generally ignored by those who simply use White's essay as ammunition against the possibility of a Christian environmental ethic.

Through his writings Berry has unleashed a barrage of ardent critiques against what he perceives as the ills of contemporary Christianity—its divorce of spirituality from economics and its neglect of and complicity with industrial capitalism in the destruction of the natural world. Yet by virtue of his position as a Christian 'insider' (although he confesses that he has always felt an outsider to "the sects and denominations" Grubbs 118), and by grounding his views in biblical scripture, Berry's alternative vision of the tradition has become increasingly well received by those seeking religious perspectives and ethics amenable to a ecological imperatives and grounded in biblical thought, but like Berry are unwilling to abandon Christianity altogether. Attention from magazines such as the evangelical *Christianity Today* (which describes Berry as "inspiring a new generation of Christians to care for the land" (Sutterfield)), interviews and articles on Berry in *The Christian Century*, and his 2005 receipt of the Conference on Christianity and Literature's Lifetime Achievement Award, indicate the positive reception of Berry's ideas amongst Christian thinkers who seek a revitalized yet scripturally grounded Christian ethic capable of providing a markedly Christian voice to a chorus of concern over recent cultural and environmental challenges.

### Agrarianism and Counterculture

Another persistent challenge to neo-agrarianism's broad acceptance is the threat of its cultural marginalization due to a lingering association between neo-traditional modes of agricultural production and distribution with the 1960s inspired counterculture. Many within the cultural mainstream perceive counterculture 'hippies' (and perhaps by



inference neo-agrarians) as alien and consider their views out of touch with mainstream sensibilities and concerns. Indeed many of Berry's early works appeared in a time when counterculture devotees had begun to preach a "back to the land" ethic of voluntary simplicity and gathered in communes to attempt a harmonious existence between one another and the land. Although Berry acknowledges his farm upbringing as his formative influence rather than the revolutionary counterculture, Berry's thought has much in common with countercultural ideals. Historian Warren Belasco's work *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* describes a late 1960s "greening" of a theretofore primarily urban-centered counterculture with an increased emphasis on environmental awareness and agriculture production and distribution.

Several key agrarian tenants were present in the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Countercultural 'revolutionaries' believed that widespread adoption of small-scale gardening could be a subversive social influence that would weaken corporate influence on the public and facilitate a revolution in the way that people interacted with nature and one another. These subversive gardeners believed that that "any urban vegetable patch could seem...a 'conspiracy of the soil'" (Belasco 21)—a concept embraced by Berry (Gift of Good Land 167-168). Counterculture advocates recognized the central role of food in "bringing people together in the short run and in raising people's awareness for the long run" (Belasco 78) and embraced "organic" gardening principles and practices advocated by organic forerunner Sir Albert Howard—a respected British agronomist and early organic advocate who has also been a tremendous influence on Berry. Nineteen-sixties counterculture advocates expressed a distain for chemicals, plastics, and anything deemed "artificial," preferring "naturalness"

both as a diet and “a liberated state of mind” (40) and like Berry and other neo-agrarians, many within the counterculture anticipated the collapse of the industrial economy. Most hippies were convinced that an apocalyptic change was immanent and many sought refuge in the countryside to wait out the coming storms of crisis. Many “radical naturalists” adopted survivalist mindsets and sought to “return to the primitive” (40). These “back to the land” advocates viewed their return to the country not as an escape but “a necessary first step” to remake society without the destructive influence of industrialism.

Yet while a counterculture swing toward ecology and organic agriculture made many countercultural ideals mesh with Berry’s agrarianism, other aspects of counterculture such as wide experimentation with drugs and sexual promiscuity run counter to Berry’s ideals of community discipline and fidelity. Presumably responding to the then prevalent influence of the counterculture, Berry notes in his 1970 work *A Continuous Harmony* that “the cultural role of both hallucinogens and intoxicants, in societies that have effectively disciplined their use, has been strictly limited...for the apprehension of religious or visionary truth,” and he criticizes youth culture’s indiscriminate and undisciplined use of drugs “in a way very similar to the way its parent culture uses alcohol: at random, as a social symbol and crutch, and with the emphasis upon the fact and quantity of use rather than the quality and the content of the experience” (*Continuous Harmony* 105). Similarly, Berry believes that sexual fidelity is essential within the context of community, since sexuality, which Berry refers to as “form of energy, one of the most powerful” must of necessity be disciplined:

At the root of culture must be the realization that uncontrolled energy is disorderly—that in nature all energies move in forms; that, therefore, in a

human order energies must be given forms...irresponsible sexuality would undermine any possibility of culture since it implies a hierarchy based upon brute strength, cunning, regardless of value and of consequence. (Unsettling of America 122)

Ultimately (as Berry may have predicted), Belasco notes that within the counterculture, this free experimentation with drugs and sex “eventually proved...destructive of community” (78).

Another critical difference between agrarian thought and the radical counterculture is neo-agrarianism’s assertion (at least in its current American incarnation) of the Western and Judeo-Christian traditions as cultural reservoirs useful to necessary change. Most in the counterculture rejected Christianity and Western thought as the root cause of societal and ecological harm, preferring instead to embrace Eastern modes of thought and spirituality. While Berry is critical of much of Western and Judeo-Christian thought (as evidenced by his aforementioned critiques of current economics and Christianity), Berry’s evocation of traditional Christian and Western language and themes makes neo-agrarian thought more palatable to culturally mainstream audiences.

In an attempt to distance itself from counterculture associations and marginalization, recent work by neo-agrarian popularizers has tended to emphasize the movement’s ‘normalcy’ and has worked to detach agrarianism from associations with hippies and other residual influences of the 1960s counterculture. Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Vegetable Miracle* includes a chapter entitled “Life in a Red State” in which she details the work of Appalachian Harvest, a co-operative of organic farmers struggling to market its produce in southeastern supermarket chains. Kingsolver differentiates these working-class organic farmers from popular caricatures of those thought to be involved in organic farming: “Mr. Natural...dreadlocked, Birkenstocked, standing at the checkout

with his bottle of Intestinal-Joy Brand wheatgrass juice, edging closer to peer in my cart, reeking faintly of garlic, and a keenness to save me from some food-karma error” (204).

Kingsolver details the appearance of Appalachian Harvest farmers: “Red Wing work boots, barbershop haircuts, Levi’s with a little mud on the cuffs, men and women who probably go to church on Sunday but keep their religion to themselves” (204-205).

Kingsolver’s mention of the farmers’ working-class articles of clothing—work boots and Levis blue jeans (which ironically were formerly associated with “psychedelia, youthful irreverence, and casual sexuality” (Belasco 178))—their clean-cut appearance, and her mention of “church on Sunday” serve as signifiers of a neo-agrarian sensibility she works to portray as ‘normal’ and ‘mainstream,’ rather than ‘hippie’ or urban-academic, and that is beneficial to rural (and urban) communities and compatible with rural values.

Similarly, after visiting an organic farm in which free-range chickens are sold directly to the public, Michael Pollen notes the diversity of the people purchasing the chickens: “a schoolteacher, several retirees, a young mom with her towheaded twins, a mechanic, an opera singer, a furniture maker, [and] a woman who worked in a metal fabrication plant” (241). Pollan adds that the farm’s customers were not “the well-heeled urban foodies generally thought to be the market for organic or artisanal food. There was plenty of polyester in this crowd and a lot more Chevrolets than Volvos in the parking lot” (241). Highlighting traditional signifiers of the middle class such as “polyester” and “Chevrolets,” Pollan’s observations strive to reinforce a message that those who are concerned about food production and who are driving alternative modes of agricultural distribution proposed by neo-agrarian reformers are not simply economic and culture elites, or counterculture ‘hippies,’ but ‘normal people’ of the middle and working class

who are concerned about dangerous food industry practices and are seeking healthier options that support local communities (242).

While sharing various common ideals with countercultural reformers such as an ecological sense of community, a focus on organic food production, interest in alternative modes of food distribution, and a sense that the current system is doomed to failure, Berry and the neo-agrarians seek a middle ground in which attitudes of respect and care of the natural world and its various communities are paramount. While Berry criticizes and if necessary seeks to correct Christian and Western traditions, they are still maintained as viable avenues of thought and reform. In his formulation of a contemporary agrarian argument, Berry excludes the more radical countercultural elements such as widespread experimentation with drugs and sex, while latter-day agrarians work to portray agrarian values as culturally mainstream. Although agrarians seek a desirable cultural middle ground and may be able to convince a mainstream audience that their values are in fact compatible with those held by many Americans, one of agrarianism's largest and most persistent challenges is its radical rejection of the economic principles upon which the 'developed world' has come to be based.

In an economy that Berry and the neo-agrarians believe to be built upon the illusion of "limitless economic growth" (Good Land 169), the unabated thirst for "profits at any cost" (What are People for? 131), and "the rule...to follow one's own interest as far as possible" (Unsettling of America 22), and that relies on "a symbiosis of unlimited greed at the top and a lazy, passive, and self-indulgent consumptiveness at bottom" (What are People for? 127), any call for a circumscription of the influence of the "free market," or a reigning in of competitive and consumptive impulses that drive it are inherently a

threat to the fundamental integrity of that system. In a cultural climate in which American-brand capitalism has appeared to have emerged triumphant over various forms of collectivism (Sanders 223), for many, industrial capitalism has come to be intrinsically equated with patriotism, righteousness, and often cited as proof of a tacit providential approval of those governing economic principles. For those who espouse these beliefs, Berry's assertion that while the principles upon which industrial capitalism is built "can enrich and empower the few (for a while)...they will sooner or later ruin us all," (Sex 12) and his questioning of "why God might particularly favor a nation whose economy is founded foursquare on the seven deadly sins" (85), seems unpatriotic or even heretical. These individuals may therefore simply dismiss Berry and his fellow neo-agrarians (along with most environmental thinkers) to the lunatic fringe.

#### Come and Join Us: Berry's Hope

Despite the daunting obstacles to the realization of his agrarian vision, Berry expresses an underlying sense of hope. Acknowledging that he is often told that his line of thought is "attractive but hopeless," Berry admits that "my hope is most seriously challenged by the fact of decline, of loss. The things that I have tried to defend are less numerous and worse off now than when I started" (Citizenship Papers 122). Likening his situation to that of conservationists (i.e., environmentalists) in which "all of us have been fighting a battle that on average we are losing," Berry states that "the point—the only interesting point—is that we have not quit. Ours is not a fight that you can stay in very long if you look on victory as a sign of triumph or on loss as a sign of defeat. We have not quit because we are not hopeless" (122). Berry points to what he sees as the hopeful signs of an emerging market for local organic produce yet he is not content to simply bide

his time awaiting a sweeping revolution. Berry's hope rests "on the willingness of good people to do the right thing now" (Bush 223). Not content to simply engage in the common practice of reciting a litany of modern societal ills, what he characterizes as "the ain't-it-awful conversation," and which Berry believes generally ends in despair; Berry seeks to inspire a "redemptive movement" which he hopes will inspire a diversity of individuals and communities to be engaged for the common good:

Mere opposition finally blinds us to the good of the things we are trying to save. And it divides us hopelessly from our opponents, who no doubt are caricaturing us while we are demonizing them. We lose, in short, the sense of shared humanity that would permit us to say even to our worst enemies, "We are working, after all, in your interest and your children's. Ours is a common effort for the common good. Come and join us." (Way of Ignorance 74).

## MARRIAGE AND ATONEMENT TO PLACE IN THE WORKS OF WENDELL BERRY

### Health and the Good Farmer

Perceptions of the all-encompassing natural world and the proper human place within it have varied widely over time. Nature has been regarded (among other things) as sacred groves teeming with sentient deities, treacherous “howling wilderness,” a stockpile of resources, or a nurturing mother overflowing with bounty. These perceptions do not necessarily follow a progressive evolution and cannot simply be dismissed as anachronistic fantasy or harmless wishful thinking given they have a tremendous effect on how nature is treated. Groups espousing differing views of nature often live and work simultaneously on a common landscape (Fiege), and navigating these various perceptions is a difficult task often mired in questions of competing ideologies and moral relativism.

Contemporary discussion of humankind’s place within the context of the natural world often settles into polarized binary extremes—one side advocates an instrumental use of nature motivated primarily by economics in which nature is seen as raw material, the wealth of nations, and the means of technological “progress;” the other advocates a preservation view that seeks to preserve nature in its “pristine” state, making nature “the subject of contemplation or art; ignoring the fact that we live necessarily in and from nature—ignoring in other words, all the economic issues that are involved” (Berry, Citizenship Papers 114). Both sides seem adamant in the righteousness of its espoused



position while working vigilantly to demonize the other, however neither side seems to accurately represent human's actual relationship to the world—a relationship in which by necessity nature must be modified to *some* degree for human survival and comfort yet while recognizing that humans are also inextricably tied (physically, emotionally, and spiritually) into the world's health and well-being.

Charting a middle ground between these two extremes (the divide between which has become exacerbated by their alignment with opposing political ideologies) has proven to be a difficult proposition. Leading neo-agrarian thinker Wendell Berry however proposes the ideal of the good farmer, the husbandman, as a model of such a middle way. Mediating and embodying a union between nature and culture as well as between use and preservation, Berry's good farmer, like the shaman of indigenous cultures, stands at the threshold between order and wildness, carefully and artfully placing degrees of order upon nature as to sustain community while maintaining reverence for and mindfulness of the inherent wildness on which life and the health of the world depends. For Berry, "health—not in the merely hygienic sense of personal health, but the health, the wholeness...of which our personal health is only a share" (both of culture and of nature) transcends relativism and serves as "an absolute good by which we must measure ourselves and for what we must work" (Unsettling of America 222; Smith 71-73).

With the "absolute good" of health and the necessary continuity of both culture and wildness in mind, Berry describes proper human relations to nature in terms of marriage, dance, and atonement. Berry utilizes his fiction and poetry as a canvas on which to expand and illustrate the concepts delineated in his essays. The result is a fuller sense of Berry's agrarian thought exemplified in the fictional world of Port William. In

Berry's stories, individuals held by the fabric of community strive for health, harmonious existence, and meaning within the context of a natural world that is at once bountiful, unpredictable, and dangerous.

### The Husbandman

In her “roadmap” of Berry's thought, political science scholar Kimberly Smith describes Berry's thought within the framework of virtue ethics, “a matter of imitating culturally defined moral exemplars rather than learning rules” (117). From the perspective of virtue ethics, “the motivation and justification of actions are both inseparable from the character traits of the acting agent” (Brennan and Lo 22), and in Berry's work, the husbandman—a keeper married to place and charged with the sacred responsibility of intermediating between the order of the household economy and wildness of the natural world while protecting the health, diversity, and fertility of the land is such an exemplar and keeper of essential virtues. For Berry, the ideal of the good farmer simultaneously married to land and household, “keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us” (Way of Ignorance 97), represents an archetypal relationship to nature that he believes “is the basic and central connection in the relation of humanity to the creation” (Continuous Harmony 153). Rather than a connection heavily mediated by the abstractions of the industrial economy or based solely on transient recreation (which Berry considers to often perpetuate an alienation from the land [Long-Legged House 32]), Berry's ideal husbandman is married (in the sense of being fit or combined) both to culture (which Berry believes should be grounded in nature) and to nature in an abiding relationship requiring the virtues of loving care, discipline, fidelity, and humility.

In his attempt to redeem the otherwise lowly current cultural status of the husbandman, Berry is critical of the heroic tradition present in (but not exclusive to) Western culture and literature. Berry notes that “the Judeo-Christian tradition as we have it in its art and literature, including the Bible is...strongly heroic. The poets and storytellers in this tradition have tended to be interested in the extraordinary actions of ‘great men’—actions unique in grandeur, such as may occur only once in the history of the world” (Gift of Good Land 276). According to Berry, these heroic tales do “bear a universal significance, but they cannot very well serve as examples of ordinary behavior” (276). While meant to be “instructive and inspiring to ordinary people in ordinary life,” Berry notes that in emphasizing above all physical and moral courage in “extreme circumstances,” the heroic tradition fails to address “the issue of life-long devotion and perseverance in unheroic tasks,” and the issue of good workmanship or “right livelihood” (277). For Berry, life-long devotion to unheroic yet worthwhile tasks, while perhaps not as glamorous, “also raises the issue of courage, but it raises at the same time the issue of skill; and, because ordinary behavior lasts so much longer than heroic action, it raises in a more complex and difficult way the issue of perseverance” (277).

Berry’s fiction serves as homage to such life-long devotion to unheroic tasks performed within the context of fidelity to community in place. The virtues practiced by Berry’s principle characters are not performed once and for all in definitive demonstrations of courage, but are learned and practiced daily throughout the course of a lifetime. Rather than a snapshot of extraordinary events or deeds, over the course of his novels Berry often traces the ‘lives’ of his characters from beginning to end—his narratives often consisting of community retelling of past happenings or (such as in the

examples of Hannah Coulter and Jayber Crow) a character's recollections of the past while nearing the twilight of life. The events portrayed in Berry's fiction attempt to span the spectrum of human experience from humorous (Grover Gibbs sticking a plunger on Portly Jones' bald head [Jayber Crow 5]) to tragic (a young girl being swept away in a flood [Place on Earth 117]), and while the events are unique to Port William they are not necessarily 'extraordinary.' Rather than epic heroism, Berry's fiction strives to portray the "common grace" of "plain folk" attempting to live meaningfully in place while being subject to internal challenges and external forces often beyond their control (in the case of Port William most notably the effect of the world wars and the rise of urbanism and industrialized agriculture).

Berry perceives a contemporary incarnation of the heroic tradition in "the ambition to be a 'pioneer' of science or technology, to make a 'breakthrough' that will 'save the world' from some 'crisis' (which now is usually the result of some previous 'breakthrough')" (Gift of Good Land 277-278). Noting the long and unintended legacy of countless 'heroic' techno-fixes, Berry characterizes the "ideology of technological heroism" as "the worst disease of the world" (Home Economics 150). According to Berry, members of "the professional class of the industrial nations—a class whose allegiance to communities and places has been dissolved by their economic motives and by their educations," "willingly cause large-scale effects that they do not foresee and that they cannot control" (150). Berry offers what he believes to be remedy to the ideology of technological heroism, suggesting that "the acceptance of the local landscape as context will end the era of scientific heroism," since "no one scientist or one team of scientists or one science-exploiting corporation can expect to 'save the world,' once the disciplines

have accepted this context that is at once wide and local” (Citizenship Papers 39). Rather than dealing with people and places as abstract quantities while being insulated from the effects of their work, Berry believes that within the context of the local, scientists must “suffer the responsibility of applying their knowledge at home, sharing the fate of the place where their knowledge is applied” (39).

Berry is not adverse to scientific inquiry and work per se but objects to a heroic desire to overcome, transcend, or conquer the ‘limits’ of the natural world, heedless of the context and effects of such heroism on local places—a tendency he also perceives in strains of religious thought that strictly dichotomize the physical from the spiritual and strive to transcend the inferior world. Orr notes that contemporary Western thought is rife with the idea of “heroic transcendence” (Prophecy 181), a restless desire for spiritual or technological escape from the nature of life in the world, an escape Berry believes is accurately described by Wallace Stegner’s account of “boomers”—those who cling to the myth of “the failed and still-failing frontier dream of easy wealth and easy escape” (Another Turn of the Crank 67).

Searching for the ever-elusive ‘big rock candy mountain,’ the ‘mother lode,’ or the ‘next big thing,’ the modern hero is in a continual state of quest (and escape), never staying in one place long enough to put down community roots or to experience the long-term effects of ‘heroic’ actions. In his discussion of individuality versus community manifest in cultural and literary traditions, Scott Russell Sanders notes that,

The cult of the individual shows up everywhere in American lore, which celebrates drifters and loners, while pitying or reviling the pillars of the community. The backwoods explorer like Daniel Boone...the lumberjack, the prospector, the Rambler and gambler, the daring crook like Jesse James and the resourceful killer like Billy the Kid, along with countless

lonesome cowboys, all wander, unattached, through the great spaces of our imagination. (225)

While glorifying the loner, Sanders perceives that in American literature, “when community enters at all, it is likely to appear as a conspiracy against the free soul of a hero or heroine,” while the “cult of the individual” celebrates individualistic heroes who, “when society begins to close in, making demands and asking questions...hit the road. Like Huckleberry Finn, they are forever lighting out for the Territory, where nobody can tell them what to do.” (225)

In his discussion of *Huckleberry Finn*, which he identifies as typical of the heroic individual tradition, Berry believes that Huck’s constant desire to “light out for the Territory,” to flee all community ties and dependencies reveals “a flaw in Mark Twain’s character that is also a flaw in our national character, a flaw in our history, and a flaw in much of our literature;” the assumption that a choice must be made between “a deadly ‘civilization’ of piety and violence or an escape into some ‘Territory’ where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation” (What are People for? 75-76). Between the stark choices of Miss Watson’s “indoor piety” and “the Territory,” Berry perceives a middle ground in the character of Aunt Sally who he describes as “a sweet, motherly, entirely affectionate woman, from whom there is little need to escape because she has no aptitude for confinement” (75). In his adolescent inability to recognize the possibility of loving community however, Huck compounds the two women into a negative sense of “civilization” that must be avoided at all costs.

To Berry, acceptance of community would have been “a natural and expectable next step after his declaration of loyalty to [Jim]” (“All right, then, I’ll go to hell”). However, in his continual quest to escape from community Huck is held in perpetual

boyhood, fleeing not only community responsibilities, but “a responsible adult community life” (77). By fleeing all community attachments, Huck is removed from the benefits of the close ties of loving attachment and interaction, and is also precluded from the possibility of the “fulfillment and catharsis of grief, fear, and pity that we call tragedy...for tragedy is experienced only in the context of a beloved community” (77). Unable to experience the full spectrum of love and tragedy Berry believes to be only available to those within the context of community, Huck is permanently stunted in his development and suspended in a mythical ideal of perpetual boyhood. Huck is forever unable “to imagine the coming to responsibility that is meaning and the liberation of growing up” (76).

Like Huck Finn who is held in an artificial state of perpetual boyhood, Berry perceives a contemporary cultural norm in which “boyhood and bachelorhood have remained our norms of ‘liberation’” (76). Berry believes that this idealization of adolescent ‘freedom’ with its inherent estrangement from community (and familial) ties and responsibilities is a dramatic revision of the “old norm” of return in which,

The natural or normal course of human growing up must begin with some sort of rebellion against one’s parents, for it is clearly impossible to grow up if one remains a child. But the child, in the process of rebellion and of achieving the emotional and economic independence that rebellion ought to lead to, finally comes to understand the parents as fellow humans and fellow sufferers, and in some manner returns to them as their friend, forgiven and forgiving the inevitable wrongs of family life (164-165).

According to the “old norm,” children pass through a season of rebellion against the ‘rule’ of the parents yet by ultimately taking their places (both by assuming their places and succeeding their parents in the continuum of generations) within the context of community, come to empathize with the parents, recognize the parents’ humanity, and

ultimately reconcile themselves as fellows. This process is echoed in Joseph Campbell's discussion of the reoccurring theme of the "atonement with the father" in which by abandoning attachment to the individualistic ego the "the potentially adult spirit" comes to "a better balanced, more realistic view of the father, and therewith the world" (120). Although Campbell's account of the father is tied up in the dictatorial "ogre aspect" of the father as stern authority figure (and with a Freudian sense that sees the father as a potential rival for the affection of the mother), his account of the necessary atonement with the archetypal father may be considered more generally from Berry's point of view in that the atonement is applicable to both parents and the larger community (world). In denying the preeminence of the ego Campbell acknowledges the value of community and of a "better balanced" (i.e., mature) reconciliation of the self within a larger context of relationships. In his account of the archetypal mythical hero, after gaining a boon in the world, the hero does not hoard the blessings of the boon for himself, but returns to the context of his beloved community so that all may benefit.

Rather than the cyclical succession of generations in place in which children mature and reconcile themselves with parents, Berry describes a "new norm" "in which the child leaves home as a student and never lives at home again" that "interrupts the old course of coming of age at the point of rebellion, so that the child is apt to remain stalled in adolescence, never achieving any kind of reconciliation or friendship with the parents" (What are People For? 165). Stalled in an adolescent stage of rebellion while geographically and occupationally estranged from their parents, rather than cyclical succession of generations in place, children strive (and are taught) to supersede or outmode their 'inferior' parents for whom they often feel pity or contempt. Berry believes



that this adolescent contempt for the ‘obsolescence’ of the parents extends to a general contempt of the past: “We appear to hate whatever went before, very much as an adolescent hates parental rule, and to look on its obsolescence as a kind of vengeance” (165). Rather than looking to or learning from past forms, Berry describes a cultural obsession with “this year’s model,” “innovation,” and “originality” (165). Not limited to relationships between children and parents, Berry believes that this “new norm” is inevitably destructive of community: “As the children depart, generation after generation, [community] loses its memory of itself, which is its history and its culture. And the local history, if it survives at all, loses its place” (165-166).

Rather than celebrating the individual transcendence of nature and place and leaving community, the ‘heroes’ of Berry’s fiction are those who choose to return and take their places as members within the connective pattern of community. Reminiscent of Berry’s own absence from and return to his native place, Berry’s character Andy Catlett in the novel *Remembering* becomes angry and embittered after the loss of his right hand to a machine in a farming accident, the traditional and religious significance of which is noted by Phillip Donnelly in his discussion of biblical themes in Berry’s work: “in biblical Hebrew writings, the right hand was the means for intergenerational blessing (Gen. 48:13-18) and was central to priestly consecration and, by implication, mediation between the human and the divine” (279). In losing his hand, Andy loses “his faith in everything” (279) and becomes estranged from the ties of family and place. Andy feels that “when he lost his hand he lost his hold...all the world [becoming] to him a steep slope, and he a man descending, staggering and falling, unable to reach out to a tree trunk or branch or root to catch and hold on” (*Remembering* 142). Bereft of the ability to hold

onto his sense of reality and to his place in the world, Andy leaves his family to attend an agricultural conference in San Francisco. Weighed down by his loss and dislocated from the context of his community, upon arriving in the city Andy feels as if he has become detached from his very identity. As a woman who was to pick him up at the airport approached him and inquired if his name was Andrew Catlett “He looked at her as if surprised...and stepped past. ‘No mam’” (124). Denying his very name (Andy’s denial of his name is significant within the context of Berry’s fiction given that names often tie characters to figures of the past, in Andy’s case his name is a tie to his grandfather Andrew Wheeler; also, individuals are often given ‘new’ names when embraced into the pattern of the Port William community, an example being Jonah Cray whose name is changed to Jayber Crow.), Andy feels as if he has become severed from the fellowship of his community as well as from his very identity as an individual.

While roaming the streets of San Francisco, Andy entertains the notion of leaving his communal and familial ties and recreating his life amidst the cosmopolitan anonymity of the city and imagines a life of leisure, travel, and autonomy (156). In the course of his wanderings, he gradually makes his way to the ocean where, “with the whole continent at his back, nothing between him and Asia but water, he stands again, leaning on the parapet, looking westward into the wind” (161). At the precipice of the western edge of the western continent, a place which simultaneously invokes the exhilaration of limitless possibilities (inherent in the idea of centuries of westward European expansion) and a traditional sense of the west as representing an ending or death, Andy stands at the crux of choice. At this point in the narrative Andy’s possibilities are as wide as the ocean vista he surveys, including the possibility of the ‘death’ of his former life, the sloughing off of

the network of community from which he felt he has become figuratively and literally dismembered and a 'rebirth' to a city life in which "[in] a small apartment...he would live alone...having nobody to quarrel with" (156). Andy perceives that "all distance is around him....All is choice around him, and he knows nothing that we wants." From the depths of lonely desperation Andy exclaims: *I've come to another of thy limits, Lord. Is this the end? Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord,*" and "Though he did not think of her, the words come to him in his grandmother's voice. They breathe themselves out of him in her voice and leave him empty as if of his very soul. As though some corrosive light has flashed around him, he stands naked to time and distance, empty and he has no thought" (161-162).

His anguished cry in the voice of his grandmother becomes a link to his past that empties him of his desire for illusory autonomy and his desire to recreate himself somewhere else and makes of Andy a new vessel prepared to receive and be received into the pattern of the membership of his community. His prayer uttered in a dire moment of desperate longing catalyzes a vision-like chain of memories. Drawing on imagery of the weaving of fabric, he sees the meeting of his great-grandparents Ben Feltner and Nancy Beecham: "That would have been in 1868, and thus was the shuttle flung, for the first time in Andy's knowledge, through the web of his making" (163). Andy's vision continues: "Mat, his grandfather, wakens, crying in his cradle, and Bess, Andy's mother, in hers, and Andy in his, and Andy's own children in theirs" (163). Formerly "naked" and "empty" like a solitary thread outside the web of pattern, as the light of dawn, "the glory that moves all things resplendent everywhere" (168) "begins to color the slopes of...

[the] hills” (163), moved by his memories, Andy chooses to return to the pattern of his native people and place:

He is held, though he does not hold. He is caught up again in the old pattern of entrances: of minds into minds, minds into place, places into minds. The pattern limits and complicates him....Out of the multitude of possible lives that have surrounded and beckoned him like a crowd around a star, he returns now to himself, a mere meteorite, scorched, small, and fallen. He has met again his one life and one death, and he takes them back....He will be partial, and he will die; he will live out the truth of that. Though he does not hold, he is held. He is grieving, and he is full of joy. What is that Egypt but his Promised Land? (167)

Whereas with the loss of his hand Andy felt as though he had lost all hope of holding, of gripping and directing his own reality and destiny, at the edge of limitless possibility he receives a vision of being held within the pattern of generations in place.

In the interwoven pattern of individual minds, one thread woven into another, he is affectionately known by those that hold him. In the “old pattern of entrances,” the singularly of his life is entered and is interwoven with other lives, an entrance of openness and intimacy requiring affection, trust, and care. In turn, the fabric of minds is intimately interwoven into its beloved place, the life-sustaining base upon which all depends and in which minds engage in a reciprocal dance by which life is sustained. Andy’s return to the pattern of community “limits” him in that by choosing to be held in the pattern he forsakes other choices or possibilities “that have surrounded him and beckoned him like a crowd around a star,” choosing instead “to eliminate the second choice” (Grubbs 13) in fidelity to his native membership and its place in the world. This sentiment is echoed by Hannah Coulter who after marrying Nathan Catlett states that “You have this life and no other. You have had this life with this man and no other. What would it have been to have a different life with a different man? You will never know.

That makes the world forever a mystery, and you will just have to be content for it to be that way” (Hannah Coulter, 109). Andy’s choice also “complicates” him however, forcing him out of the illusory simplicity of autonomous self-interest and brings to light the complex interdependencies by which his life is maintained and by which his being effects the other lives around him.

Andy chooses not follow the heroic path of individual transcendence of place, time, and community, or the imagined transcendence of the limits of mortality and existence in the world. He forsakes the enticements of immortality enabled by illusory insulation from the processes of life, death, and renewal, and “takes back” the mortal realities of “his one life and one death,” recognizing “without sorrow” that “he will be partial, and he will die,” “the order he has made and kept will be overthrown” (Place on Earth 321). While not glamorous, his reentrance into the fabric of community enables him to experience a fullness of joy and to engage the spectrum of human experience from joy to tragedy since he cannot “experience tragedy in solitude or as a stranger, for tragedy is experienceable only in the context of a beloved community” (What are People for? 77). By opening himself to attachment with others and place Andy in turn is held in the fabric of those ties, ties that others may perceive (as Andy once did) as bonds of captivity, yet for him form the underpinning pattern of his Promised Land.

Upon returning home, Andy’s entrance in the membership of community is consummated in another vision. As he rests “at the foot of a large oak” he finds himself in a “darkness which he has never known...all that is around him and all that he is has disappeared into it...everything has been taken away, and the dark around him is full of the sounds of crying and of tearing asunder....What he is, all that he is, amid the outcries

in the dark and the rending, is a nothing possessed of a terrible self-knowledge” (219).

Rearticulating his sense of detachment from all communal ties and from the context of his place he experienced as a result of the loss of his hand, Andy dreams of the terrifying darkness of being cut off from the world. Andy dreams he is nothing—the terrifying loneliness of a detached existence (an existence seemingly akin to the Cartesian ideal of the essential self as a detached intellect). Yet in the midst of his hopelessness Andy receives a touch on his shoulder from a “dark guide” who leads him to a landscape filled with animal and plant life and upon which the breaking sunrise “resounds and shines in the air and over the countryside, drawing everything into the infinite, sensed but mysterious pattern of its harmony” (220). From lonely Cartesian detachment, Andy is led into the engagement and pleasures of his community and of the sensuous world.

Echoing Berry’s poem “Elegy” which describes “a song in the Creation” in which “earth and song and mind, / the living and the dead were one” (Collected Poems 240), Andy perceives the sun’s light as singing, “whether of voices or instruments...he cannot tell” and sees that “from every tree and leaf, grass blade, stone, bird, and beast it is answered and again answers....The world sings. The sky sings back. It is one song, the song of the many members of one love....And it is light” (Remembering 220). To Andy, the sun, the sky, animals, and plants are revealed as members of a divine oneness engaged in the communal act of harmonious music (Wirzba describes music as “an excellent metaphor...for helping us understand the character of our memberships with others...because music invites us to be intentional about and more fully acknowledge our involvements with others” (Paradise of God 188)). Andy’s guide, now described as the “dark man giving light,” then reveals to Andy an idyllic vision of Port William held in

the pattern of that divine oneness, its homes and fields inhabited by those who have lived there before: “He sees that they are dead, and they are alive. He sees that he lives in eternity as he lives in time, and nothing is lost...he sees men and women he remembers, and men and women remembered in memories he remembers” (221). Now intimately and willfully married (i.e., joined) within the pattern of beloved community in place, Andy’s journey of absence and return (like Odysseus’ difficult return to Ithaca) enacts the ancient theme of return and places Andy amongst the membership of honorable husbandmen to the world.

### Marriage

In addition to the ideal of the husbandman’s choice to return and be joined to his community and place in the world, Berry describes the nature of such a marriage. Berry prefaces his explanation of a marriage relationship to the land with the simple acknowledgement that humans depend upon nature for survival, and like all other creatures must change it: “What we call nature is, in a sense, the sum of the changes made by all the various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places” (Home Economics 7). Unlike other creatures however, “humans must make a choice as to the kind and scale of the difference they make” (7). Inherent in Berry’s thinking is the assumption that the type and scale of human modifications of nature are results of human choice and that some choices are better than others in preserving the long-term health and survival of natural and human communities. Berry notes that in modifying nature through agriculture, humans disturb what is otherwise a relatively stable balance of “use and continuity [in which] the life of one year must not be allowed to diminish the life of the next; nothing [living] at the

expense of the source” (Unsettling of America 93). By manifesting their own interests into the world, cultivating the soil and favoring certain species over others, humans effectively remove natural checks that maintain stability and “by the skills of responsibility” (93) must work to maintain the health, fertility, and diversity of the world on which human and non human communities depend, “with ties and obligations in both directions” (Way of Ignorance 100).

Akin to the difficulty of joining two lives in the cultural pattern of human marriage, which Berry believes works to balance the potentially dangerous power of sexual energy while providing a social structure for the continuity of generations, yet that Berry describes as “a perilous and fearful effort [in which] there can’t be enough knowledge at the beginning” (Long-Legged House 131), Berry describes a marriage relationship to nature as “solemn...demanding, and blessed [as human marriage]” (Continuous Harmony 154). In describing the highly complex roles between farmer and nature, Berry goes beyond the traditionally imagined (marital) gender roles of farming as “a masculine act in which the farmer forcefully [makes] the female (virgin) land productive” (Fiege 177). Instead, Berry’s farmer

[passes] with ease across the boundaries of the so-called sexual roles...the preserver of seed, the planter, becomes midwife and nurse. Breeder is always metamorphosing into brooder and back again...the farmer, sometimes known as husbandman, is by definition half mother...and the land itself is not mother or father only, but both...farmer and land are thus involved in a sort of dance with the earth at opposites of sexual poles. (Unsettling of America 8)

Rather than a simple matter of “subjugation” or “domestication,” Berry’s marriage between farmer and land is complex and the roles highly fluid. The good farmer—as an ideal husbandman and moral exemplar—must be adaptable, and possess the correct



knowledge (gained from personal experience or gleaned from inherited intergenerational or cultural wisdom) to be able to assume varying roles as specific situations require.

In his excellent analysis of “the extraordinarily rich metaphor [of] man as husband, in the oldest sense of the word, having committed himself in multiple marriages to wife, family, farm, community, and finally to the cycle of nature itself, marriage of farmer and land” (Hicks 119) in Berry’s fiction, Jack Hicks describes Berry’s ideal husband as “earthly man in his most noble state, doomed to separate consciousness, but in that single mind making a pact with the world” (120). In Berry’s fictional world of Port William, Hicks identifies the character of Mat Feltner as “the ideal husband to the world, a striving upward in the flesh, back toward unity with the natural world” (124), and contrasts him to “lesser men around him” (124) who have been less successful in marrying self and household with the natural world.

One of these “lesser men” is Jack Beechum whose life story is recounted in *The Memory of Old Jack*. Although “a true husband to his land” (Memory of Old Jack 125), “faithful...through all its yearly changes from maiden to mother, the bride and wife and widow of men like himself since the world began” (122), his loveless marriage to Ruth dooms him to an incomplete existence. His attraction and marriage, based on youthful sexual desire, joins two people with hopelessly disparate worldviews. Ruth, although initially fascinated by “a dark energy” she perceived in him “that she wanted...to capture for herself, to control—to convert...to ends that she could smile upon in the open daylight” (39), is driven by a desire to “turn away from the land...toward the business of the town,” an ambition for the “ease and wealth” of “town people” (42).

Ruth's desire for wealth and social betterment (i.e., transcendence), that Jack become "a great landowner... [gaining] the respect of the best people... [sending] their children to the best schools...started in careers that would make them even more wealthy and respected than their parents" (50-51) contrasts sharply with Jack, who "did not want to improve himself or enrich himself or come up in the world" (50), but desires only to fulfill his responsibilities to the fabric of his community. Although Jack futilely attempts to enlarge his holdings in an effort to please Ruth's ambition, a fire destroys his barn and he nearly loses all his land to debt. Ultimately, he resigns himself to the fact that he will never be able to appease his wife since he lives "too close to the ground" (42).

A physical gulf indicative of the emotional distance between Jack and Ruth widens as she is repulsed by his hands—the hands of a working farmer—which "did willingly and even eagerly what, before, she had only seen black hands do reluctantly," and under which "her flesh contracted" (44). The couple's first child, "the only son they would have" (45), a symbol of their aborted union, is stillborn. In her grief for her dead child Ruth assumes a posture of death, lying "straight and still, her body as formally composed as a corpse, her eyes shut" (47) a death not only of her child, but of her failed union to Jack and his world. As Jack stands gazing at the 'corpse' of his wife, he feels a "palpable silence whose pressure [he feels] in his chest and throat" (47). In Berry's thought, silence is significant in that it functions as a test for individuals and relationships. With "a potential of terror in it [silence] raises, still, all the old answerless questions of origins and ends. It asks a man what is the use and the worth of his life. It asks him who he thinks he is, and what he thinks he's doing, and where he thinks he's going" (Long-Legged House 41). For other (more complete) characters such as Hannah

Coulter who while sitting at her home “feels the silence reaching out like a live strand, binding her to place” (Memory of Old Jack 74), silence is an opportunity for peaceful reflection. Yet as Jack and Ruth become increasingly estranged, a silence grows between them which Jack finds “less and less able to bear” (49), and as Jack grows old silence becomes “the most demanding thing he knows” (155).

The only fruit of Jack and Ruth’s otherwise barren marriage is their daughter Clara. However, for Jack, Clara merely confirms his failure to “[unite] farm and household and marriage bed” (126) in that Clara leaves for college never to return to the fellowship of the Port William community. She marries Glad Petit (a banker) and when visiting Glad drives her to “the very foot of the porch steps so that Clara could pass from the car into the house almost without touching the ground” (133). Like her mother, Clara looks condescendingly on Jack’s life of farming and even attempts to avoid the ‘contamination’ of physical contact with his beloved soil. Finally, Jack resigns himself to the thought that “his daughter and son-in-law were of a kind that was estranged and alien, and probably inimical, to his kind” (138) and eventually loses all contact with her.

Conversely, Mat Feltner, “the ideal husband to the world,” is more successful at uniting “farm and household and marriage bed” (126). No stranger to difficulty and sorrow, in *A Place on Earth* Mat’s character “is defined, dramatically, by his struggle with the meaning in his son Virgil’s death” (Hicks 124) in a distant battle of World War II. Struggling with his grief, Mat takes no solace from the local preacher, a relative stranger to the family, who attempts to console them by fostering the transcendent hope of a better world to come. While attempting to comfort the Feltners, the preacher’s eyeglasses reflect the light of a nearby window. In Berry’s work, windows are significant

portals through which the world may be thoughtfully observed, intermediaries between inside and outside, a point where the cultural ‘pattern’ of the home and the wild ‘pattern’ of the natural world meet (e.g., “The window is a form of consciousness, pattern of formed sense through which to look into the wild that is a pattern too” (Collected Poems 73)). The preacher’s glasses however *reflect* or “throw back without absorbing” (Oxford 1423) what the window reveals—the outside world. Perhaps alluding to the biblical passage stating that “the light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light” (Matthew 6:22), the preacher’s eyes are obscured behind “opaque discs of light” that cause him to appear “exultant and blind” (Berry, Place on Earth 99).

The preacher fulfils his prescribed role as a ‘seer’ for his parishioners, but regardless of his exultancy, his triumphant happiness in a transcendent world to come, he is not filled with the light of knowledge but “the light that is in thee be darkness” (Matthew 6:23) as he is effectively blind to the nature of the world outside the window and to the nature of the Feltner’s intimate relationship with that world. While in the Feltner home, the preacher speaks of a “Heavenly City,” yet Mat’s attention drifts outside. Through the window to which the preacher was blind, Mat notices that “the buds on the maple trees leaning over the road have grown big. He notices this as he always notices it for the first time in the spring, with an involuntary pleasure” (99). Recognizing his pleasure in the cyclical renewal of the seasons, Mat realizes that his own sense of hope lies not in a transcendence of the world, but “in the world, in the bonds of his own love” (99), and in his bonds of household and land. Mat finds comfort not in hopes of

transcending his earthly lot, but by his eminence in the natural cycles of the surrounding world he observes just outside his window.

Mat draws deep satisfaction from performing the work of husbandry. Berry describes Mat's pleasure in caring for his orchard, "one of the works of his life": "He likes his work—the look of his hands moving and choosing, correcting, among the tangle of the branches" (163), his joy in helping to birth a calf (182), and in simply sitting down to "watch the stock eat" (181). Speaking of his fulfillment in his work Mat explains, "if a man doesn't farm for his own satisfaction, he'll have a hard time finding another good reason to do it...there's *not* any other life for me" (181). Mat also describes the pleasure he takes in the many beautiful places on his farm: "cool places or quiet ones with water running or an overlook...I've thought of some of them nearly all my life" (184).

Although history is a palpable presence to the residents of Port William (mirroring Berry's own town of Port Royal) in that they are inheritors of the legacy of the pioneering "first-arrivers" who gained the land by "killing or driving out the original possessors" (Long-Legged House 179), and who left the land "diminished and detached from its sources" (Place on Earth 27), Berry's vivid descriptions of the surrounding rural scenery portray landscapes in which butterflies, cattle, woods, and apple trees seamlessly marry nature with human agricultural work. Yet death and nature's destructive power is ever present and as much a part of the resident's marriage to the land as its beauty. Mat and Jack speak of the land, "the wife of their race," as "more lovely and bountiful and kind than they have usually deserved [yet] more demanding than they have often been able to bear" (303). An example of nature's potential for death and destruction is the violent death of a young girl (Annie) in a flood (117).

Berry is careful not to portray marriage to the world as care-free or idyllic but as demanding, often sorrowful, and ultimately temporary. *A Place on Earth* concludes with Mat's quiet contemplation of his place in the world and his reflections on his forbearers. Mat realizes that his ancestors and their works "are as forgotten as the forest they destroyed," and comes to the realization that despite his "constant struggle to maintain and regulate his clearings...he knows *without sorrow* that they will end, the order he has made and kept in them will be overthrown, the effortless order of wilderness will return." (321, emphasis added). In contrast to the heroic-mind that attempts to erect monuments that will endure forever, symbols of culture's 'triumph' over the world, Mat accepts, without sorrow, a marriage to a world in which his works are temporary. Mat recognizes that ultimately his works will give way to the larger pattern of nature and that "the merest and most improbable accident is made a necessity and part of a design, where death can only give into life" (321).

Jack's loveless marriage and absent daughter ends his hope of familial continuity in place, yet Mat's household which (despite the death of his son) is preserved (at least temporarily) as a site of life and continuity. Mat and his wife Margaret take in their son's wife Hannah—who is pregnant with the couple's first child—while Virgil is away at war. Upon learning of Virgil's death, the couple essentially adopts Hannah as their own daughter. In a striking transformation of sorrow into hope accompanying the birth of Hannah's child, Mat experiences a grisly dream in which he drives a bulldozer piling dirt onto a mass grave filled with the bodies of young soldiers "[lying] on their backs, unspeakably submissive to the approach of the great machine" (224). As he is atop the "lurching and swaying machine," to his horror he recognizes the face of his son among

the mass of bodies and abruptly awakens. The first thing Mat perceives as he rouses is the surrounding world inhabited by trees, flowers, mist, and birds: “he sees that the dawn light has begun to grow...he grows aware that the birds are singing. The trees, the streets, the air over the town are filled with their voices.” (225). A door to an adjoining room suddenly swings open and “he turns, blinking to accustom his eyes to the dimness, and sees...naked and red, still wet from the womb, a newborn child” (226). Mat, the “ideal husband to the world,” awakes from the awful carnage of death and war to a renewal of his household’s bond to its place, with its marriage of humans to nature renewed as a site of birth, life, and continuity.

The wildness inherent in the world resists the impositions of overly rigid cultural forms however, and continuity in Berry’s fiction does not simply a patrimonial succession, but is passed along a “wayward” line of those able and willing to marry their lives and hopes to their place (with the constant reality that that line of continuity may at any time come to an end). The hope of continuity present in the birth of Hannah’s daughter Margaret is later extinguished when Margaret leaves for college, marries, and chooses not to return to Port William. Hannah laments that Margaret (like all her children) leave the membership never to return: “They are gone. They come back varyingly often...but the old ties...are mostly broken. We live in different places, lead lives that are different, have different hopes and thoughts, know different things. We don’t talk alike anymore” (Hannah Coulter 112). Hope for continuity is rekindled however in the return of Margaret’s wayward son Virgie to Port William to take up farming (181-185).

Like Andy's dream of the terrifying darkness of being severed from the pattern of community followed by a vision of Port William's past members, Mat's vision involves an escape from the dark horrors of killing and war into the renewal of his membership within the wholeness of the life of his place. Yet whereas Andy perceives those who have gone before, Mat awakens to the birth of a child and to the possibility (although in no way guaranteed) future continuity of the community's human life. Considered together, the experiences of Mat and Andy combine to create a larger vision of a fabric of human community extending into the past as well as the future yet grounded in and at one with its larger context—the common ground of its place.

### Atonement

Along with the idea of a marriage between humans and land, Berry's sense of union to place culminates in atonement, an at-one-ment and reconciliation between humans and the surrounding natural world. Like many 'environmental' writers, Berry works to break down rigid conceptual barriers estranging humankind from the natural world and emphasizes the inherent ecological connections on which humans depend for survival. Yet Berry's sense of human relation to the world "surpasses mere connection and verges on identity" (Another Turn of the Crank 75). Not simply a Cartesian disembodied intellect observing a conceptually distant world or a waylaid spirit on a journey to transcendence, Berry describes his sense of his own being "as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants...my body and my daily motions as brief coherences and articulations of the energy of the place, which would fall back into the earth like leaves in the autumn" (Long-Legged House 178). Considering himself an articulation of its energy (a sentiment also expressed in "Window Poems" in which



speaking of himself Berry declares that “His ancestor is the hill” (Collected Poems 75), and in “To a Siberian Woodsman”: “I am the outbreathing of this ground. My words are its words as the wren’s song is its song” (96)), Berry seeks an intimacy with his place, an atonement that places him within the pattern of the surrounding world.

Berry believes that it is “not out of the abstract ministrations of priests and teachers from outside the immediate life of a place that the ceremonies of atonement with the creation arise, but out of the thousand small acts, repeated year after year and generation after generation, by which men relate to their soil” (Hidden Wound 88). For Berry, atonement requires a deep and conscious commitment to life and work in place which is made difficult if not impossible by what he characterizes as modern society’s “urban nomadism,” a state of constant physical and spiritual transience in pursuit of upward mobility that results in “a loss of meaningful contact with the earth and the earth’s cycles of birth, growth and death” (Long-Legged House 86). For Berry, this nomadism—inherited from centuries of European colonizers who “having left Europe...had not yet in any meaningful sense arrived in America, not having *devoted* themselves to any part of it in a way that would produce the intricate knowledge of it necessary to live in it without destroying it” (183)—is fed by an illusory sense of autonomy, “suggesting that the self can be self-determining and independent without regard for any determining circumstance or any of the obvious dependencies” (Unsettling of America 111), and is a roadblock to meaningful atonement to place.

Berry’s journey of atonement to his place is detailed in his autobiographical work *The Long-Legged House* which recounts his efforts to belong to his native place after a long absence pursuing a literary career. In his return, Berry reverses the traditional liberal

sense of identity established through the possession of land present in the thought of Hobbes and Locke who believed that “the human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others and freedom is a function of possession” (Macpherson 3). Rather than freedom and identity being based on absolute proprietorship of the self and of land and in which “society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors” (3), in returning to his native place, Berry describes his sense of belonging and possession beginning to “turn around.” Berry recognizes that “if I belonged *in* this place it was because I belonged *to* it” (Long-Legged House 156). Beginning the “long difficult realization of the complexity of life” in his place, Berry began to consider himself as “living *within* rather than *upon* the life of the place...to think of my life as one among many, and one kind among many kinds” (149, emphasis added). With the humbling recognition that his dedication to careful observation and participation in his place would require a lifetime of learning while dying ignorant, Berry begins to sense he had “ceased to be a native as men usually are, merely by chance and legality, and had begun to be native in the fashion of the birds and animals; I had begun to be born here in mind and spirit as well as in body” (166,168).

Alluding to tenets of his professed Christian faith, Berry refers to his atonement with place as being “born again,” yet rather than the traditional Christian focus on transcendence of the world, Berry is born to “re-enter the silence and the darkness [of the ground]” (207). As mentioned previously, silence is a recurring theme in Berry’s work assuming the double meanings of a potential comfort as well as a terror. Similarly, in Western and Christian thought darkness is often associated with “death, sin, ignorance, and evil,” yet Berry emphasizes its alternative connotation: “potential life—the dark of germination” (Tresidder 142). Berry associates darkness with a realm of potent

mystery—the divine mystery of life and regeneration enacted through the processes of death—and considers darkness a source of life and clarity. Entering the realm of darkness, which Berry refers to as “elemental mystery, the original condition in which light occurs...the only condition or way in which we can see the light” (Unforeseen Wilderness xiii), involves entering a realm of mystery and complexity (and for Berry divine grace) impenetrable to limited human reasoning and intellect. To enter darkness, the individual must therefore cast aside the “light” of a belief in sure or complete knowledge and enter a realm lighted by recognition of human ignorance and limitation and reliance upon grace and faith.

Both Berry’s essays and poetry speak of discoveries made by casting aside light and becoming intimate with darkness. In “A Native Hill” Berry relates a parable-like account of a hunter who gains clarity in darkness by casting away his lantern, declaring: “I have turned aside from much that I knew, and have given up much that went before. What will not bring me more certainly that before, to where I am is of no use to me. I have stepped out of the clearing into the woods. I have thrown away my lantern, and I can see the dark” (Long-Legged House 208). Similarly, Berry’s poem “To Know the Dark” promises access to a mysterious and wonderful world that “blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings” to those who are willing to enter the darkness without a light, admonishing readers “To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight” (Collected Poems 107).

For Berry, darkness is often associated with soil, “the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all” (Unsettling of America 86). Soil is “alive” as well as “a grave” (86). A site of death and decay, soil is a “dark wilderness, ultimately unknowable,

teeming with wildlife” (Home Economics 140). Again drawing on Christian imagery Berry considers the soil “Christ-like” in that it is also the site of re-birth and “resurrection,” making life out of death, “its fertility...always building up out of death into promise” (Long-Legged House 204). As an inestimable gift, a grace that cannot be made or fully understood, for Berry, soil must be maintained and preserved “in human use only by good care” (Home Economics 62-63, 135). For Berry, the farmer married to his place, his very being an articulation of the energy of the land, serves as “the trustee of the life of the topsoil” (Continuous Harmony 128) who employs his skill and knowledge (often gained from generations in place) to protect its fertility and vital wildness.

*The Long-Legged House* concludes with a passage describing the merging of his being with the darkness of the soil, his atonement with his beloved land:

I have been walking in the woods, and have lain down on the ground to rest...and suddenly I apprehend...the dark proposal of the ground...my breastbone burns with imminent decay....My body begins its long shudder into humus. I feel the substance escape me, carried into the mold by beetles and worms. Days, winds, seasons pass over me as I sink under the leaves. For a time only sight is left to me, a passive awareness of the sky overhead, birds crossing, the mazed interreaching of the treetops, the leaves falling—and then that, too, sinks away. It is acceptable to me, and I am at peace. When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world.  
(213)

As Berry lies on the ground imagining his own disintegration back into the fecund darkness of the soil, he imagines the descent of his body, “its long shudder” into the leaves. Berry’s poem “A Grace” (dedicated to Gregory Bateson whose work deals with connecting patterns between otherwise apparently disparate systems), speaks of a fundamental correspondence or “rhyme” between the body and the earth, the “rhyme of hand with leaf” and the ground that “gathers them all into its plot” (A Part 36). After striving to atone his life to the patterns of his native place, Berry imagines his final

corporeal entrance into the connecting pattern of his native hill followed by the consciousness of his sight, which although lingers longer than his body, pausing to perceive the sky, does not take flight to a distant realm but also accepts “the dark proposal of the ground” into which it fades. Berry finds his atonement with the world “acceptable.” Rather than fearful of the thought of the disintegration of his being into soil, Berry, as a trustee of his soil, finds peace in his ultimate atonement with it.

Echoing Berry’s marriage metaphor, his account of his atonement with his native hill describes the ground as having a “dark proposal.” The “proposal” of the ground seems to suggest some form of volition—the earth extending an invitation of relations to Berry. This raises the issue inherent in Berry’s use of marriage as a metaphor of human relations with the world in that how can one enter into a relationship with a party that possesses no volition of its own and therefore can only passively receive rather than actively assent to or engage in a ‘marriage’ relationship? Berry’s fictional characters confront this issue in various ways. Speaking of her beloved place, Hannah Coulter states that “The steam and the woods don’t care if you love them. The place doesn’t care if you love it. But for your own sake you had better love it. For the sake of all else you love, you had better love it” (Hannah Coulter 85). For Hannah, whether or not the land reciprocates the love expressed to it is inconsequential since for the good of “all...you love” (which within the context of Berry’s thought would include the community in its widest sense), humans must love the land regardless of that love being requited.

Another perspective on this relationship is expressed by Berry’s character Wheeler Catlett, who after helping young Elton Penn to purchase a farm he had been stewarding for some time explains to Elton that the farm falling into his possession was

not simply arbitrary, but that “the farm chose you” and that “the land expects something from us...we start out expecting things of [the land]...and then some of us, if we stay and pay attention, see that expectations are going the other way too. Demands are being made of us, whether we know it or know what they are or not. The place is crying out to us to be worthy of it” (That Distant Land 284).

The suggestion that the earth or a place possesses any form of consciousness, volition, or may place demands on humans is certainly anathema to a modern scientific worldview which generally perceives the world as an amoral conglomeration of interacting matter. In order to explain Berry’s perspective therefore, critics such as Richard Pevear consider Berry’s account of his atonement with his native hill a form of nature worship, a “stoic deification of nature,” stating that, “Nature idolatry is finally a worship of power. It was for her grandeur and power that the Stoics worshipped nature. It is this power that Mr. Berry worships, the ‘Native Hill’ that eats its owners, the power that will turn him into humus—an event which he anticipates with peculiar enthusiasm” (Donnelly 276). These critics contend that like so called ‘primitive’ animists, Berry worships various aspects of the world which seem incomprehensible and therefore miraculous to limited human understanding.

Wirzba notes however that Berry’s sense of God and the divine is not an entity far removed from the world but one intimately involved with its workings and whose presence is eminent within it. This perspective sees nature not as a worthless backdrop to human drama (i.e., history) but as “a powerful medium through which God’s presence [may] be made known...the object of God’s pleasure and delight” (Paradise of God 27). This view is contrary to some strains of Christian thought (particularly those influenced

by Gnosticism and neo-Platonism) that view the physical world as devoid of God's presence and as a punishment. (The early Christian thinker Origen being an example of such thinking—Origen taught that all spirits rebel from God's will, and that "God therefore made the present world...as a punishment" (Origen 67).) Wirzba however cites various scriptural examples such as the book of Job, and Psalms 65 and 104, which describe God as "intimately involved in the minute and mundane movements of the world," and suggests that for Berry, "God is at the very center of our being at the heart of the whole creation as its animating, pulsating life" (Soil 255). From this perspective, the world is not seen simply as amoral matter, but an expression of God's love, a medium though which the divine will may be realized, and a vehicle by which humankind may atone with deity. Wirzba argues that Berry enacts a certain form of detachment, not the traditional Christian detachment from a corrupt world but detachment from a false sense of self and autonomy from the creation—and by "dying to self, even to a dying into the ground" (261), Berry is in fact enacting a certain form of mysticism, "a journey into the presence of God" (257).

In his work *Nature*, Emerson (who is generally attuned upward rather than downward) describes himself "standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space," in a state in which "all mean egoism vanishes" (Emerson 6). Like the "passive awareness" of Berry's disembodied sight, Emerson describes himself as "a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (6). Berry essentially becomes an earth-bound Emerson for whom in a certain sense downward is heavenward

as he detaches himself from the egoism of illusory autonomy from the world and atones himself to the divine presence he perceives as eminent in the dark mysteries of creation.

Berry's poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation," encourages readers to "practice resurrection" (Collected Poems 152). Berry accomplishes this by his imagined disintegration and atonement with his native hill followed by his account of rising again: "When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world" (Long-Legged House 213). Berry's experience of death and rebirth is no less than a communion with "something heavenly in the earth," followed by a quickening and a renewal of his bonds with "his source and his destiny" (212)—the divine darkness of the soil. Berry's atonement with his place works not only to atone himself to the divinity present in creation but to redeem the status of the natural world in Christian thought, reconciling the wayward spirit to the sustaining dust in which a divine present may be perceived and from which the soul takes its being.

In approaching Biblical texts from an ecological perspective, Wirzba notes that death assumes various meanings. Beyond the biological death, Wirzba notes that the hubris of considering one's self autonomous from the divine and live-giving grace of the creation is a type of spiritual death:

To deny the grace of God or to deny the support of those who daily sustain us is not only to be guilty of hubris and sin. It is to prepare one's self for a life in which other cease to be of concern. The moment we forget to care for others, to care about them and make their needs, joys, and sorrows our own, we proclaim our utter separation from the sources of life and health. We become spiritually dead. (Paradise of God 52)

Wirzba also describes a sense of death in which within the context of Christianity Christians "put to death" their old selves or ways of being in favor of a new Christ-centered way of being: "What is being put to death here is the destructive instinct within



us that would impair or ignore the well-being of others, an instinct that denies service to others so that we can maximally serve ourselves” (52). Wirzba notes that this death and rebirth in Christ has implications for the natural world since Christ is perceived as a cosmic redeemer of all creation (not just human souls) and that by assuming the mantle of Christ, the Christian is “implicated in and responsible for (in limited ways) the restoration of creation” (49): “As we serve the community of creation they and we ourselves will be strengthened so that together we can be healthy and whole, fully alert and equipped to continue the reconciling work of Christ” (52).

All of these conceptions of death are evident in Berry’s atonement passage. Berry’s imagining of his “long shudder into humus” via beetles and worms speaks to his own biological death. In addition, Berry’s imagination of the disintegration of his being and his atonement with the divinity he perceives as present in creation serves as an enactment of his relinquishment of his own illusory sense of autonomy—his state of spiritual death or estrangement from God-given sources of life and health. Any lingering sense of self-centered isolation from his place evaporates as Berry peacefully accepts his atonement to his native hill and in turn rises “up out of the world,” being “born again” into a new way of perceiving his relationship to his beloved place and is in turn dedicated to the preservation of its divine wholeness.

Several characters in Berry’s fiction experience similar atonements with place. As mentioned previously, while resting in his fields Mat Feltner in *A Place on Earth* recognizes “without sorrow” that his works and order will ultimately be overthrown as he “comes into the presence of the place...[and] a wakefulness as quiet as sleep” (*Place on Earth* 321). Despite his failure to unite his disparate worlds of marriage bed and land,

Jack Beechum in *The Memory of Old Jack* ultimately finds comfort and fellowship in his relationship with his land and comes to a peaceful end lying in his beloved fields. Berry describes Jack's final atonement with "his place in the world":

Slowly the glow fades from the valley, the sky darkens, the stars appear, and at last the world is so dark that he can no longer see his legs stretched out in front of him on the ground or his hands lying in his lap; he has come to be vision alone, and the sky over him is filled and glittering with stars. Now he is aware of his fields, the richness of growth in them, their careful patterns and boundaries. In the dark they drowse around him, intimate and expectant. And now, even among them he feels his mind coming to rest. A cool breath of air drifts down upon him out of the woods, and he hears a stirring of leaves. He no longer sees the stars. His fields drowse and stir like sleepers, borne toward morning. Now they break free of his demanding and his praise. He feels them loosen from him and go on. (146)

Berry asserts that "every man is followed by a shadow which is his death—dark, featureless, and mute" (Long-Legged House 212). Reminiscent of Berry's account of his own atonement with the land, darkness gradually encroaches upon Jack as he loses a sense of his body until, like Berry; he is left with "vision alone." Gazing at the open expanses of starry sky while lying within the "patterns and boundaries" he has carefully placed upon his beloved fields, Jack feels the ground beneath him, "intimate and expectant," ready to accept him into the pattern of its divine darkness, a wildness beyond the reach of human understanding and control reflected in the starry darkness above. As with others in the fellowship, "He was the farm's farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his; he knew that, of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter" (Jayber Crow 182). No longer upon his fields but "among them," as though becoming bereft of "God's breath" (Sex 110), "the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7), Jack feels a "cool breath of air drift down upon him out of the woods" as his body enters the rhyming pattern of fallen leaves. As Jack's vision fades, he passes

into his beloved fields, which like those of Mat Feltner, “go on,” breaking free of Jack’s “demanding and praise.” Acknowledging that his tenure as caretaker of the gift of good land is ultimately temporary, Jack is “silently possessed by the earth on which he once established the work of his hands” (Memory of Old Jack 157), hastening toward quietness.

In addition to his various examples of atonement with community and place in his fiction and poetry, Berry’s works include counter examples of those who either through their own volition or by being caught in alterative conceptions of union and community do not achieve this oneness. An example of such a character is the previously mentioned preacher in *A Place on Earth* who fails to comfort the Feltner family over the loss of their son Virgil. With his hope fixed firmly on “lifting up the Heavenly City” and being “free of the world” (Berry Place on Earth 99), the preacher not only stands outside the fellowship of community, but is useless in his appointed role as a moral and spiritual guide. Berry condemns the type of thinking exemplified in the preacher—a focus on the hereafter to the neglect of ties to the present world—as gross misunderstandings of scripture and calls for the need “to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of Creation” (see Continuous Harmony 1-33; What are People for? 95-102; Sex 95).

An additional counter-example to atonement with community and place are the unnamed pilots in *A Place on Earth*. Like machines in the midst of a garden (a fallen garden that is no stranger to the devastating effects of war [Kauffman 17-33]), warplanes twice disturb the quiet of Port William. The first plane “appears suddenly” and the townspeople hear “racket of the engines...all at once, so near they not only hear it but

feel the vibration of it in the air and in the ground under their feet. As it comes nearer they can see the blur of the propellers, the black gun-barrels spiking out of the glass blisters....It passes above their heads, shaking the ground” (Place on Earth 29). Mat recognizes the pilot: “That boy of Grover Gibbs’s....They made a pilot of him” (30). Later, a group of planes flies over the town and Mat (haunted by the recent loss of his son in battle) “thinks of the young men enclosed in that deathly metal, *their fates made one with interlocking parts and men and events*” (165, emphasis added).

Helpless in the grip of larger events over which they have no control, either forcibly or through their own volition, these young men in effect have become parts of machines and atoned to an industrial economy which Berry believes “lead[s] inevitably to war” (Sex 91). Like the tractor driver hired to destroy farm homes in *The Grapes of Wrath* who “did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth...a part of the monster, a robot in the seat” (Steinbeck 37), the bomber pilots have essentially become one with the machines to which their fate has become inextricably tied. The planes become symbols of the modern industrial economy based, according to Berry, on the “seven deadly sins” (Home Economics 169; Sex 85), and which serves as the antithesis of Berry’s communities based on “marriages, kinships, friendships, neighborhoods, and all our form and acts of homemaking...by which we solemnize and enact our union with the universe” (Home Economics 118). For Berry, the estrangement from the communion of humans and nature (either by choice or coercion) inherent in the modern industrial economy inevitably results in disintegration, “loneliness and meaninglessness” (118; Hidden Wound 130-131).

## ERRATUM

Page 103 was not assigned in this manuscript.

## CONCLUSION

Wendell Berry's "agrarian argument" proposes a rethinking of culture and community grounded in the recognition of the inherent ties between the health of all life and the well being of the sustaining land. Criticizing contemporary education and religion for their neglect of community and the earth, Berry offers the archetypal figure of the good farmer—a husbandman married simultaneously to nature and culture, domestication, and wildness—as a model of proper human interaction with the world. Looking to the rich cultural legacies of the past, Berry challenges the heroic tradition of transcendence of nature and community evident in the modern phenomena of "scientific heroism" and "urban nomadism" in favor of the ancient themes of return and marriage to a beloved community and place. Rather than heroism in extraordinary circumstances, Berry celebrates the husbandman's lifelong devotion to the interweaving and adaptation of human patterns to the patterns and contexts of local places and to the preservation, continuity of the community in its largest sense.

Berry's Port William fiction contains multiple examples (and counterexamples) of such a union of individuals, community, and place. In imagining a membership of residents aware of and who strive to be faithful to their ties to one another and to their place, Berry provides a working illustration of concepts such as marriage and atonement to place found in his essays. Berry's characters represent archetypal worldviews that he perceives (both for good and ill) in historic and contemporary society and that are the subjects of his essays. Berry's fictional world serves as a microcosmic stage upon which

these varying worldviews interact—modern morality plays in which characters contribute to the integrity or to the destruction of community and the world. Characters such as Mat Feltner and Andy Catlett choose to take their places within the pattern of community and are successful in marrying their households to the world. Others, such as Jack Beecham, while still integral in the fabric of community are less successful in such a marriage while others such as Jack's daughter Clara and the local preacher never attain such a marriage and remain outsiders—sojourners caught in an illusion of autonomy and focused on material gain or on future heavenly rewards, ignorant and destructive of the fabric of community that surrounds them.

Reflecting on humankind's poor treatment of the earth some call for a "new story," a fundamentally new way of understanding humankind's proper place within the context of the natural world. While perhaps not 'new' in that his stories and sense of the world are in many ways contemporary articulations of ideals subtly present throughout history, Wendell Berry's "agrarian argument," richly illustrated in his depiction of marriage and atonement between individuals, community, and place in the Port William stories, serves as a template to a fundamental rethinking of humankind's role and actions within the beauty, danger, abundance, and mystery of its place on earth.

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